

A New Solution to the Gamer's Dilemma¹

A gamer (or player) is a moral agent who plays videogames, and a virtual act is an act which a gamer performs, using her in-game character, on a computer-controlled (but not human-controlled) character in the game's virtual world.² According to Morgan Luck (2008), gamers face a dilemma when it comes to certain virtual acts they perform. This is because most gamers regularly commit acts of virtual murder (which are virtual acts that would have counted as murder had the virtual environment in which they were performed been real), and take these acts to be morally permissible. They are permissible because unlike real murder, no one is harmed in performing them; their only victims are computer-controlled characters, and such characters are not moral patients. What Luck points out is that this justification equally applies to virtual pedophilia (which are virtual acts that would have counted as pedophilic had the virtual environment in which they were performed been real), but gamers intuitively think that such acts are *not* morally permissible. The result is a dilemma: either gamers must reject the intuition that virtual pedophilic acts are impermissible and so accept partaking in such acts, or they must reject the intuition that virtual murder acts are permissible, and so abstain from many (if not most) extant games.

There are multiple ways in which one could react to this dilemma. Luck (2008), and the subsequent literature that has arisen around the dilemma (specifically, Bartel 2012, Patridge 2013, and Luck & Ellerby 2013), have pursued a solution which rests on finding some morally relevant distinction between the two acts, such that acts of virtual murder, but not virtual pedophilia, can be performed without moral qualms. This, however, is only one way of solving the dilemma. We can clearly see this by considering the premises leading up to the dilemma:

P1- Intuitively, gamers believe that acts of virtual murder are morally permissible, while acts of virtual pedophilia are morally impermissible.

P2- The justification for the (intuitive) permissibility of acts of virtual murder is that no one is directly harmed by such acts.³

P3- The justification for virtual murder carries over to virtual pedophilia.

P4- There are no other morally relevant differences that justify a differential attitude towards these acts.

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² Sometimes videogames are referred to as computer games, but throughout I will use the term videogames which is the term commonly used by gamers. In some cases, I will omit the word 'video' and use 'game'.

³ I add the term 'direct' to exclude the possibility of indirect harm. One might think that either act produces indirect harms, for instance, to society as a whole. This seems to be the idea that some critics of videogames have, that e.g. playing games normalizes violence as a whole, or is a form of idleness, anti-social behavior, etc.

C- Therefore, either gamers must accept that both types of acts (virtual murder and virtual pedophilia) are morally permissible, or they must reject that either is.

Aside from embracing the conclusion and thus adopting a revisionary attitude (which is an open option for those who are willing to partake in virtual pedophilic acts, or those who are willing to abstain from virtual murder), one may reject any of the argument's premises, and not just the fourth premise. Of course not every premise is equally vulnerable; neither P2 nor P3 seem objectionable. With P2 it is hard to see how the harmlessness of virtual murder is not the reason for its moral permissibility, and P3 likewise seems true since neither act has a victim. Even if one maintains that the gamer who performs the act of virtual pedophilia is herself harmed (for instance, on virtue ethical grounds, or on the grounds that engaging in such acts increases the likelihood of performing and/or desiring the real life counterpart), it seems that the same sort of harm will be present in cases of virtual murder.⁴ This leaves P1 and P4. P4 is a promising target, and this is why the literature focuses on undermining it. But I do not think it an easy target. While there are moral differences that allow us to distinguish *some* instances of virtual murder from *some* instances of virtual pedophilia,⁵ to reject P4 we need a moral difference that differentiates every instance of virtual pedophilia from every instance of virtual murder. Such a difference has not been forthcoming,⁶ and indeed if my argument here is right, there is no such difference. Consequently, my aim is to pursue the hitherto unexplored strategy of rejecting P1. P1 seems to me implausible, I do not have the intuition that every act of virtual murder is acceptable, nor that every act of virtual pedophilia is unacceptable. Moreover, other gamers I have spoken to share this skepticism, and in the extant literature Patridge (2013) seems to reject at least one part of P1. She does not think all acts of virtual murder are acceptable, writing "on this view not all acts of virtual murder get a moral pass. Since, as I argued previously, virtual murder too can be represented in such a way that reasonably connects it to our moral reality, it might also be subject to moral criticism."⁷

1 The Constitution of Virtual Acts

To see why we should reject P1, we first need to understand how virtual acts becomes constituted, and how they acquire moral significance. This will tell us which acts we should be thinking about, and how we should go about evaluating the morality of acts like virtual murder and pedophilia. To begin with we can note that the gamer's dilemma takes for granted that virtual acts have moral significance (it begins with intuitions about their moral permissibility)

⁴ Perhaps empirical evidence can show otherwise, but in the absence of such evidence it is hard to see why one should default on accepting this asymmetry.

⁵ For instance, I am sympathetic to Bartel's 2013 argument insofar as it establishes that *some* instances of virtual pedophilia (those that perceptually depict the act) are instances of child pornography, and thus can be distinguished from virtual murder on those grounds.

⁶ For instance see Patridge (2013) and Luck & Ellerby (2013)

⁷ Patridge 2013 p.33

despite these acts lacking victims (computer-controlled characters are not moral patients). Thus plausibly, the moral significance of these acts derives from their effect on the only moral agents that are involved in the act, the gamers and those who may be observing their virtual actions.⁸ This moral effect might arise in various ways, for instance, through increasing or decreasing the likelihood of committing real life counterparts, or through the systematic effect on one's moral viewpoint of equivalent real-life acts. For our purposes we need not commit to a specific mechanism by which virtual acts attain their moral significance. All we need to keep in mind is that virtual acts have a moral significance, and this significance derives from those engaging with the game.

Turning to the constitution of virtual acts, we can start by noting that like real life acts, the identity of virtual acts partly depends on the context of the performance. For instance whether a real life act is one of murder or self-defense depends on the situation the agent is in e.g. whether the agent is being attacked or not. With virtual acts, however, a further complication arises. Specifically, virtual acts seem to have two different contexts. There is the in-game context of the act, which is the context of the character in its virtual world, and the context of the gamer performing the act. Clarifying the relationship between these two contexts is the first step in understanding how virtual acts are constituted.

We may think, plausibly, that virtual acts are at least partly individuated by the relationship they bear to the acts of the character that the gamer controls. For instance, consider an act of virtual killing in which a gamer directs her character to kill a computer-controlled character. Whether this act counts as virtual murder or virtual self-defense depends on the situation of the character in the virtual world. This situation is provided by the videogame designers who build the world, populate it, and allow the gamer to interact with it through the mediation of a digital display (e.g. a tv) and some means of controlling events (e.g. through a controller) in the game world.⁹ To take some examples, in the *Uncharted (2007-present)* series gamers control a (virtual) human character, Nathan Drake, who is a modern day treasure hunter, placed in a realistic environment where he has to kill other human characters, usually in self-defense. When the gamer directs Drake to kill in his world, the killings done by Drake are (usually) instances of self-defense. Because of this, the gamer's virtual killings are instances of virtual self-defense. By contrast, the *God of War (2005-present)* games put gamers in the role of Kratos, a vengeful Spartan warrior, who lives in the ancient Greek mythical age of heroes. When the gamer kills with Kratos, Kratos is (often) committing murder (though often towards nonhuman characters), and thus the gamer's acts are ones of virtual murder.

⁸ Game observers have always existed; in many cases one or two people will play a game while their friend or friends watch them play. But more recently, with the advances in the cinematic quality of games, and the rise and integration of services like Twitch, game observers are an increasingly large part of videogaming.

⁹ While it is hard and maybe impossible to give necessary and sufficient conditions for when something counts as a videogame, it is plausible to think that games must minimally allow the gamer the capacity to interact with the virtual world through virtual acts.

Not only is the type of act performed by the gamer and his character dependent on the context provided in the virtual world, but the available justifications for performing a given type of act also depends on the events of that world. We can see this by considering optional cases of killing in the *Uncharted* and *God of War* games. These cases occur when computer-controlled characters are not out to kill the protagonist. In cases where the gamer chooses to virtually kill these characters anyway, the gamer's character commits an act of murder, and by proxy the act of the gamer is one of virtual murder. But now notice that the justifications available to the gamer in each case differ, and this is because the justifications available to each character differ. Drake is an adventurer who goes treasure hunting for his own enjoyment and the thrill of discovery. By contrast, Kratos is a man driven by desperation and anger (our first encounter with him shows him attempting suicide because of the burdensome memory of having murdered his own family partly through the interference of the Olympian gods). In light of this, when Drake and Kratos commit murder, the justifications for their actions differ. Despite appearances, Drake's murders are more morally vicious, they are murders performed against a background of thrill-seeking. Kratos's murders evoke more sympathy, he is all but insane with suffering. Just as these protagonists have different justifications available for their murders, so the gamer has different justifications for the virtual murders. When the gamer plays as Kratos, s/he can justify the virtual murder as an enactment of Kratos' suffering, but cannot do so with Drake, who's murders in context are more sadistic.

The above discussion seems to indicate that virtual acts depend on the status of the character's acts in the game world. The reasoning behind this idea is that videogames (and more generally games), unlike other mediums of fiction, do not merely present us with a fictional world which we passively observe, they also allow us to participate in it by contributing to the fiction of that world. What our contribution is depends on what our contribution amounts to in that world. So our acts count as virtual murder, virtual killing, or virtual pedophilia because they are acts of murder, killing, or pedophilia in the game world.

Still, this picture is incomplete. A fuller picture requires that we also attend to the context of the gamer who performs the virtual acts. We can see that this part is missing by noting that a gamer can engage with a game world in various ways. S/he can perform acts with or without knowing their in-game significance, and with or without regard for that significance. A gamer will know the significance of the acts if they are following the in-game narrative, and will (usually) not if they simply jump into the game e.g. by trying it at a friend's house. They will give regard to the significance of acts if they seek to appropriately engage with that world, performing acts that are basically in-line with the game's narrative. They will ignore that significance if they either willfully act in a way that gives no regard to the context, or inadvertently because they are unaware of the context.

How does the way gamers engage with the game affect our individuation of virtual acts? We can answer this question by considering a case in which the gamer disregards the act's in-game significance. Imagine a morally degenerate gamer who fantasizes about murdering others,

notices that he resembles Nathan Drake, and so purchases the game with the sole purpose of enacting his fantasies. We can imagine that the gamer entirely disregards the narrative, perhaps muting the game and skipping any story sequences. What act does such a gamer perform? On the one hand it is clear that Drake continues to perform the very same act in the game's fiction. If the act was one of self-defense, it continues to be so. However, since the gamer is not aware of the in-game context, and anyway would choose to disregard it if he was aware of it, it seems implausible to attribute virtual self-defense to him. Instead his act is plausibly one of virtual murder. What *he* is doing is virtually murdering, but the way he commits this act is through Drake's act of virtual self-defense.

Where does this leave us with respect to the constitution of virtual acts? While initially it seemed plausible to think that virtual acts individuated by the in-game context of those acts, we have now seen that virtual acts can also be independent of that context. In some cases an act counts as one of, for example, virtual murder because it is an act of murder in the game, in other cases the act counts as virtual murder independently of the type of act it is in the game.¹⁰ This reveals an ambiguity in the argument leading up to the gamer's dilemma. Specifically, P1 is not clear about which sorts of acts it is discussing: are these virtual acts that are due to the in-game context, or virtual acts due to the gamer's context? I think it is plausibly the case that Luck intends the first of these. This is because P1 is implausible if virtual acts are to be constituted through the gamer's context. If a gamer performs virtual acts in a world while intending them to be enactments of murder, whether or not they are so, then it is not clear that we intuitively think such acts morally acceptable. Such acts obviously do not harm the computer-controlled characters, but they do seem morally harmful to the gamer who indulges in them (and as we saw the gamer is the source of the moral significance of virtual acts). Indeed, it is likely the case that those who fear videogames and their effects on society are precisely worried that videogames are a means of enacting sadistic or otherwise questionable fantasies. So, if the gamer's dilemma is to be successful, its first premise must be appealing to virtual acts that are constituted by the in-game context. Of course for this context to matter for the *gamer's* act, it must be one that the gamer is aware of, and one that the gamer chooses to engage with. So I think a plausible clarification of the gamer's dilemma is that its subject matter is virtual acts in which the gamer is *appropriately engaging* with the game. Through appropriate engagement, the virtual act and the in-game character's act are made to align, and the ambiguity in the act's context is resolved.

2 Sport, Storytelling, and Simulation

The gamer's dilemma concerns itself with those acts that a gamer performs when appropriately engaging with the videogame world. But what counts as appropriately engaging with a virtual world? The answer to this question depends on the ends of the game designers in

¹⁰ This is not to deny that the two acts share some properties (for instance in this case both are acts of killing), just that the virtual act is not simply a virtual variant of the in-game act.

presenting a given world. Game designers have reasons that are extrinsic to the game itself, reasons like wishing to profit from the game, or doing what their company asks them to do. But they also have reasons that are intrinsic to the game world itself. In producing a game, game designers construct a virtual world and a means of interacting with it with the intention of engaging the gamer in some way. It is in these ways of engaging the gamer that we come to see what constitutes appropriate engagement with a given game.

If we look at current and past videogames, we see that there are at least three different ways in which game worlds have attempted to engage their audience. A first way of engaging the gamer is by providing her with a virtual space in which a *sporting* or competitive event is held. Some of the earliest videogames, like *Pong* (1972), were designed solely with the intent of allowing gamers to virtually compete (either with a computer or human controlled opponent). This trend continued with arcade games that focused on high scores and provided leaderboards, and continues to day with current popular multiplayer games like the *Call of Duty* (2003-present) series. Indeed it is plausible to think that games in general have had competition as one of their central constituents (for instance, consider the game of chess).

A second way of engaging gamers involves providing the gamer with a virtual space in which a story is told. *Storytelling* games also emerged early on in the history of gaming. For example, the early *Legend of Zelda* (1986) tells a simple story in which the protagonist, Link, seeks to rescue the princess Zelda. Similarly the *Super Mario Bros.* (1985-present) games tell the story of Mario as he seeks to rescue Princess Toadstool/Peach, and the *Sonic the Hedgehog* (1991-present) games focuses on Sonic seeking to free his animals friends from the machine obsessed scientist Dr. Eggman/Robotnik. This form of game is also increasingly more popular with advances in technology which allow for more complex and cinematic stories as in the *Uncharted* and *God of War* games.

A third and final way of engaging gamers involves providing gamers with a virtual world in which a particular environment and/or characters are simulated. Such *simulation* games differ from sporting and storytelling games in that the game demands less from the player. Unlike sporting games, simulations do not challenge the player to meet some criteria that constitute winning, nor do they necessarily reward the player with points or a high score. And unlike storytelling games, simulations do not tell a story. While a virtual world, a protagonist, and certain actions are provided and so give the game a storytelling context, no particular story is being told. Like the other two types of games, simulation games emerged early on in videogame history. Perhaps the most famous and oldest games are *Microsoft Flight Simulator* (1982) and *SimCity* (1989). To give a particular example, consider the *Microsoft Flight Simulator*. As the title suggests, the simulation is of flying a plane. This sets up a minimal context for the game, but little else is demanded from the player. While it may be argued that one can win the game by become successful at flying, this would be a stretch of the definition of winning. The game doesn't demand that you learn how to fly the plane, crashing stylishly (or not) is equally permitted. Of course the player can master the simulation in the sense of becoming proficient at

achieving their goals in the virtual world, but this is different from achieving a high score or winning. The simulator also provides no story. Again one might think that there is a story about learning to fly a plane, but this would be an attenuated sense of storytelling. It is more the case that one tells one's own story of how, e.g. of how they are learning to be a pilot. A story of that sort is really the gamer's own construction, though of course the construct is constrained by the context of the virtual world (i.e. that you are in a plane, attempting to fly, etc.). Like storytelling games, simulation games have become more advanced over the years. Two notable and more recent examples are the games *The Sims* (2000-present) and *Minecraft* (2011), where the first simulates the lives of a household of one's own design, and the latter simulates what might be best described as a basic version of life (the protagonist must ward off hunger and stay healthy, while exploring the world, mining it for natural resources, and using these resources to better their condition). Again such games provide a substantive context for the player to achieve mastery in, but the context does not demand of the player that they win or achieve a high score, or that they unfold any particular story.

Before proceeding, it is worth making a final note concerning this tripartite distinction. These ways of involving the gamer are not mutually exclusive. Indeed most games involve sporting, storytelling, and simulation. An example of a series that particularly succeeds at all three of these is *Grand Theft Auto* (1997-present), where the games tell the story of a corrupt protagonist in a big city, but also give the player the freedom to roam the large city aimlessly as a simulation would, and provide various sporting events within that city (e.g. racing, attempting stunts, etc).

3 Virtual Murder and Virtual Pedophilia

If we accept that the gamer's dilemma focuses on virtual acts that involve appropriately engaging with a game, and we accept that games engage players in one or more of the three ways above, then we have to accept that depending on the type of game, there is some correct standard of appropriately engaging with that game. So for instance when playing a sporting game, to appropriately engage with the game one must compete. If I join an online *Call of Duty* match with the sole purpose of appreciating the scenery, or with the intent of stalking one particular player, then I am not engaging with the game appropriately. To engage I must compete, or do my best to do so. Similarly if I play an *Uncharted* game with the sole purpose of beating the game in as quick a time as possible (in the videogame world, this is known as a speed run), then I do not appropriately engage with the game. Rather, I engage with it as a sporting event where the aim is to beat the shortest recorded time. This brings us to simulation games. Unlike the other two types, it is harder to say what appropriate engagement with a simulation game consists in. Perhaps to engage appropriately with a simulation one has to achieve mastery in one's control over those elements she can control (e.g. the protagonist, the plane, the city, etc.) such that one can do what one wants to do. But this is implausible, a simulation does not *demand* mastery of the gamer, the gamer is simply able to enjoy the simulation more if she masters it. The issue is

that simulation games seems to leave open what the gamer must do. Indeed, it is reasonable to suppose that appropriately engagement with a simulation consists in simply experiencing one's freedom in the virtual world. A person who plays *Minecraft* need not do anything in particular. They can try to survive and keep their character well fed, but this is not necessary. They can also build a home, an elaborate system of tunnels, a monument, or collect resources, but none of these things are necessary either. Doing these things might expand the gamer's freedom, but it is not required of them. The game does not punish players for their failures, nor does it reward them for their successes. While the gamer's character can acquire things, and can die (e.g. from starvation), the game does not assign these features any value; no score is kept, and no narrative is frustrated. It is up to the player to value things one way or another. So unlike sporting and storytelling games, which require something of the player for her to appropriately engage them, simulation games do not similarly make demands to appropriately engage the game. Or alternatively, the demand is for the player to enjoy the lack of demands.

If we now consider appropriately engaging in one of these three ways, and consider that the focus of P1 are virtual acts that constitute appropriate engagement, we begin see what is wrong with the intuitions in P1. According to these intuitions, virtual murder is always morally permissible, and virtual pedophilia is always impermissible. But is this plausibly the case for all types of games? My contention is that we have different intuitions depending on the types of games we are considering. Here I will focus on storytelling and simulation games which sufficiently establish the falsity of P1 (I put aside sporting games because I think our intuitions there are not clear when it comes to virtual pedophilia). I think that we intuitively believe that when it comes to storytelling, acts of *both* virtual murder and virtual pedophilia may be acceptable. When it comes to simulation games, by contrast, we intuitively think that *both* acts of virtual murder and virtual pedophilia are unacceptable. To see that we have these intuitions, let us consider a few real and hypothetical games.

Consider our intuitions about storytelling games. Since storytelling games provide the gamer with a narrative, it is reasonable to think that such games provide a moral viewpoint. Indeed this is the (in my view) defensible position that Grant Tavinor (2009) takes. He writes "There is, then, a genuine reason for the events and actions depicted in games to be morally criticized, even if fictional: representations in themselves are amenable to moral criticism, especially when they express an objectionable viewpoint."¹¹ If Tavinor is right, then provided a storytelling game does not present an objectionable viewpoint (e.g. a story glorifying racism, murder, ethnic cleansing, or pedophilia), individual acts in that game, and the corresponding virtual acts, should be morally permissible. To see this consider the case of a game with a morally unobjectionable viewpoint, for instance the *God of War* games. While these games are undoubtedly violent, and their protagonist morally questionable, the viewpoint they present is not

¹¹ Tavinor 2009 p.164

itself objectionable. What the games do is contribute to the mythical tales from ancient Greece. Much as the original stories of the Greek heroes and gods of Olympus present us with betrayal, war, and other morally questionable acts, the *God of War* games do the same. But just as those stories also tell us entertaining tales of heroism, so do the *God of War* games. We are moved by Kratos' plight, we experience (indeed enact) his heroism, his resolve, and his anger. It is hard not to be fascinated by a character who, in vengeance for the death of his family, chooses to declare war upon the gods of Olympus. Surely our acts of virtual killing in such a game are acceptable, much as the killings in *The Odyssey* are.

But now consider the possibility that a future iteration of the game depicts Kratos committing pedophilia. The *God of War* games already contain scenes in which the gamer controls Kratos as he has sex off-screen, and we can imagine that in this instance Kratos, by way of punishing a human colluding with the Olympians, takes his young son or daughter and molests her. There is no question that what Kratos does is wrong, yet it is not clear that what the gamer does is similarly wrong. Almost all of Kratos' actions are questionable, it is hard to see why this one should be singled out. Indeed this seems comparable to reading a fictional book about an immoral protagonist who, amongst others things, is a pedophile. Unless we think that fictions can never contain acts of pedophilia, it is hard to see why the hypothetical *God of War* scenario should be singled out.

One may remain unconvinced on two counts. First, one may think that there is a relevant difference here, and it is that the gamer *controls* Kratos. This is unlike a fictional book, where the reader only observes the story. This objection is not convincing. The act of using the game controller is obviously not what is at stake, it is rather that the inputs we give allow the representation of pedophilia to unfold. But it is hard to see why this is significantly different from a book. After all, the act of reading allows the representation of pedophilia to unfold, and the reader can, just as much as the gamer, put the book/controller down. Perhaps the thought is that the difference arises only in specific conditions. For any token act in a videogame, the game gives the gamer some level of freedom in performing the act. Some acts are entirely *not* up to the gamer, as when the game enters into a cutscene where the player watches the character do something without being given control. Such cases are more like watching a movie than playing a game. Other acts give the gamer control over the act, but do not give her a choice in whether to perform it or not. The act is simply required if the story is to make progress. Finally, the gamer may be given control over the act, and also given a choice in whether or not to perform it, since there are multiple paths of progress. Perhaps the claim is that it is only virtual acts of the last sort that cannot involve virtual pedophilia.

But even this is implausible. If as the gamer you are given the option of either having Kratos violently and graphically murder the entire family (which, in the game's typical style, will be on-screen), or given the option of having Kratos molest the child off-screen, it is not clear that you as a gamer have chosen a virtually permissible act in one case but not the other. Moreover we can once again compare the situation to that of reading a book. A few books allow the reader

to pick one or more path in progressing a story, or have more than one ending. Now imagine a case that parallels the *God of War* case. Is it clear that one must avoid the ending that contains pedophilia but not the one that contains murder? My intuition, at the very least, is that the answer is no. It is not that the acts do not differ, it is that both are consistent with the story being told in the game's fiction. So it seems to me that the extent of our freedom in a storytelling game is not relevant to the permissibility of virtual murder or impermissibility of virtual pedophilia.

One might remain unconvinced for a different reason. When Luck defines virtual pedophilia, he says that such acts are ones that would have counted as pedophilia had they been real. Perhaps one could think that in the context provided in the *God of War* games, the act of molesting a child is not pedophilia. One might appeal to the fact that the games occur in a mythical age, or in the distant past when sexual interactions with children were acceptable. This strikes me as very implausible. But even if we assume its truth, it is just as easy to come up with an example that is clearly a case of in-game pedophilia. A good example may be derived from the survival horror series, *Silent Hill* (1999-present). In these games, the gamer takes on the role of a protagonist who is, for one reason or another, psychologically disturbed. *Silent Hill 2* is a particularly good example. In it, the gamer controls a character who (unbeknownst to the gamer and the character) has murdered his own wife. The gamer controls this character as he uncovers the repressed truth about what he has done. Consider now the possibility of a *Silent Hill* game that takes on an equivalent scenario involving pedophilia. This would be clearly a case of pedophilia since the game is set in modern times and in a realistic setting, yet it is not clear that a virtual pedophilic act in that game would be impermissible. Part of the point of depicting and allowing the player to perform that act is to evoke a sense of psychological disturbance in the player, and this is what *Silent Hill* games aim to do. Moreover *Silent Hill* is not an exception in the videogame world. Other games also focus on morally disturbing scenarios. A notable recent example is *Heavy Rain* in which a father is forced to perform dangerous, self-harming, and immoral acts in order to retrieve his kidnapped child.

So in storytelling games neither acts of virtual murder nor virtual pedophilia are unacceptable if the game does not take a morally questionable viewpoint. Do we have the same intuitions when it comes to simulation games? I think that the answer is no. I think we have the *very opposite* intuition for *both* virtual pedophilia and virtual murder. We do not think that simulations of either act are morally innocent. Indeed, my contention is that P1 *seems* intuitive initially because when we originally consider acts of virtual murder and virtual pedophilia, we default on acts of virtual murder that are presented in current games, where these games are either storytelling or sporting games, but we compare those acts to acts of virtual pedophilia in a hypothetical simulation game. The reason for this is simple: while plenty of existing games present virtual murder in storytelling and sporting contexts, few if any games portray virtual

murder in a simulation context.¹² By contrast there are no (at least well-known) games depicting pedophilia of any sort.¹³ So when we are asked to think about such cases, we default on thinking of a simulation of virtual pedophilia.

One might wonder why this should be what we imagine by default. There may be several reasons for this, but I think one primary reason is that when we think of a game containing pedophilia, our first instinct is to think that the reason for portraying the act cannot be anything but enjoying the act, and wanting to perform it. Unlike killing, which is often a means of acquiring something more than the death of the one murdered (for instance, winning the war, defending oneself, getting one's own way, revenge, etc.), pedophilia seems largely useless. Why would anyone commit such an act but for the enjoyment of that act?¹⁴ I contend that we move from that idea to imagining a game that depicts the act for its own enjoyment. Of course, games of that sort are simulation games.

The issue that simulation games raise is that they provide the gamer with an avenue to perform acts freely but virtually. As such, they are games designed with a context that aims at letting the gamer's context (rather than the in-game context) be definitive of the act. When a gamer buys a game that simulates murder and/or pedophilia, this seems a reflection of the sorts of things they find desirable. They seem to want to engage in acts of murder and pedophilia, but since such acts are risky in real life, the virtual world of the game is a convenient outlet.¹⁵ This is entirely unlike the case of storytelling games. When a gamer buys those games, they do not (if they intend to appropriately engage with the game) do so with the intent of enjoying the freedom to perform certain acts, rather, they do so to hear a certain sort of narrative unfold. While they may enjoy the means by which this narrative unfolds (e.g. through shooting others, sneaking past them, etc.), appropriately engaging the game is enjoying its narrative.

At this point we may be convinced that simulation games containing virtual pedophilia are impermissible, but we may be hesitant to think that simulation games with virtual murder are similarly impermissible. To better demonstrate that they are, let us consider one last example by way of making this point. Consider the popular *Grand Theft Auto* series, which, recall, is a particularly good case of a game with storytelling, simulation, and sporting aspects. This series of games has caused much controversy outside the videogame world, and this seems largely

¹² A potential example of a murder simulator is the game *Manhunt* (2003). While the game is not a pure murder simulator, it does get close to being one. The game, in line with the intuitions I have, elicited a negative response, being banned in New Zealand, Germany, and Australia (as well as receiving an adult only rating in Ontario).

¹³ It should be said that few games depict any sex at all. Indeed videogames have only recently come to depict sexual contents comfortably, partly due to earlier societal perceptions that games cannot deal with mature topics like sexuality. Killing, by contrast, has always had a place in games since such acts are a convenient way of challenging the gamer, and have the symbolic meaning in sporting cases. For instance, a game like chess has pawns being eliminated which is a highly symbolized killing, and many early games use jumping on a computer-controlled character as a symbolic way of killing it.

¹⁴ I owe this idea of the uselessness of pedophilia to Majd Akar and Bradford Cokelet, both of whom raised this point in discussing the dilemma with me.

¹⁵ Add comment on cathartic use of games

because the game gives gamers free reign to commit a fairly large variety of murderous actions. But for gamers, while *Grand Theft Auto* indeed provides a violent simulation, the game is much more than that. What gamers appreciate are the beautifully designed, expansive, and detailed virtual worlds, the good gameplay, clever design, and the dark humor of the stories the game tells. Every *Grand Theft Auto* provides a storytelling context, and with it critiques and lampoons society's violence and injustice.¹⁶ But to those outside videogame culture, the only salient aspect is the free-roaming violence that can be enacted. *Grand Theft Auto* looks like a violence simulator and not much more.

Now imagine that society is right. Imagine a *Grand Theft Auto* game stripped of its sporting and storytelling components. The game, in such a case, would be a violence simulator.¹⁷ Is it so clear, to gamers or nongamers, that a game whose sole purpose is to put you in a city where you can virtually abuse others, murder them, rob them, and otherwise harass them is morally acceptable? Or more to the point, is it clear that the acts you engage in, when you appropriately engage with this game, are acts that we would think morally permissible? It seems to me that the appropriate answer is no. One's virtual acts in this game are not morally permissible, not if their only pretext is engaging in a simulation of such acts. So it seems to me that appropriately engaging with simulations that provide opportunities for either virtual pedophilia or virtual murder are morally questionable.

With the above argument we now have counterexamples to both components of P1. It is neither the case that virtual murder is always morally permissible nor the case that virtual pedophilia always is not. This is because depending on the type of game we are considering, our intuitions change. Of course this is not to say that the type of game is the only factor relevant to our moral intuitions. For instance it seems to me that the *way* a game depicts an act can be objectionable too. A depiction of pedophilia or murder that is realistic and fetishizes the act may undermine the role of the act in the game, much in the same way we think that a movie may have gratuitous violence given the movie's aims, or that the way some pornography depicts women is degrading rather than being merely arousing. This further issue, however, would be the topic of a different paper.

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¹⁶ We can see this, for instance, in the comic advertisements we hear for gun stores, or, for instance, in the fourth iteration of the game, the dark but humorous story of an immigrant who cannot progress in the society except by becoming a criminal.

¹⁷ Actually, a little more would be needed. The *Grand Theft Auto* games do not put much emphasis on consequences, and this makes them less a simulation of the real world. A gamer has to run over many pedestrians, for instance, before the police are moved into action. Similarly traffic laws rarely need be obeyed.

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