

The Ethical Status of Virtual Actions

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ABSTRACT. One of the most interesting features of the computer is its ability to create virtual environments. These environments allow us to interact with objects that are simulated by the computer and are not real. They thus allow us to realize actions that have no repercussions whatsoever on the non-virtual world. This seems to qualify virtual environments as an ideal playground to do all kinds of things that would be labelled ethically wrong if realized in the real world. Nevertheless, we have the feeling that certain types of virtual actions – raping computer simulated girls for example – are not right at all, in spite of the fact that we know that no actual person is harmed by this. In the light of phenomena like virtual rape and violence, philosophical reflection on the ethical status of actions realized in virtual worlds has become inevitable. This paper will provide the groundwork for such a reflection, by answering the following questions: Can we apply the predicates of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ to actions realized in virtual worlds? And if this turns out to be problematic, how can we explain our feeling of discomfort with certain types of virtual behaviour, i.e. our feeling that there is something ‘not at all right’ about, for example, virtual rape? These questions will be answered in the three sections of this paper. The first section deals with the necessary condition for the application of the predicates of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ to virtual actions: freedom in the virtual environment. In the second section, we will endeavour to demonstrate that the fulfilment of this necessary condition is not sufficient when it comes to the application of these predicates to virtual actions. The last section explains how we can still be uncomfortable with certain virtual actions, even though the said actions escape ethical judgment.

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I. THE ETHICAL STATUS OF VIRTUAL ACTIONS

One of the most interesting features of the computer, omnipresent in today’s society, is its ability to create virtual environments. A

virtual environment is an artificial space in which we can interact with objects that are not real but simulated by the computer.² One of the main attractions of these virtual environments is that they allow us to do things we normally cannot do: they extend our possibilities.³ In a digital tennis game, for example, we are able to play in the finale of the *US Open*, although most of us would probably lack the qualities to make it to the first round in real life. The computer allows us to take part in this event by simulating in great detail the Arthur Ashe Stadium where the main court of the tournament is located, a tennis racket we can control with the mouse of our computer, and a virtual Roger Federer or Rafael Nadal that is trying to beat us. Whereas we would never be able to compete against players of this calibre in the actual world, it becomes a very real possibility in the virtual realm of the game.

What is perhaps even more interesting, however, is that virtual environments not only allow us to do things we *cannot* do, but also things we *should not* do in the real world. One should not, for example, go out into the streets to shoot innocent pedestrians: this is ethically wrong. But in the notorious computer game *Grand Theft Auto 4*, it is exactly what the player can do.⁴ In this game, the player is presented with a 3-D simulation of New York City in which he or she can move his or her character around freely and engage in numerous activities such as driving cars, going on a date with a computer generated girl or boy, and buying weapons in order to shoot the innocent virtual characters populating the town. *Grand Theft Auto 4* allows the user to ‘get away’ with things that would be condemned as wrong if he or she were to do them in the real world. An even more radical example of this would be a Japanese computer game that caused a lot of commotion for encouraging players to rape the computer generated girls populating its virtual world.⁵ Whereas raping a real person is considered to be wrong, it is less clear why raping a *simulation* of a person is condemnable, since no actual human being is harmed in this practice. Still, it goes almost without saying that a lot of people had the feeling that virtual rape was not right at all and the game was banned.

The example of the rape game perfectly articulates the tension that lies at the basis of this paper: raping a computer simulated ‘person’ does not harm anyone, but there still seems to be something not right about it. In light of this tension, philosophical reflection on the ethical status of actions realized in virtual worlds has become inevitable. This paper will provide the groundwork for such a reflection, by answering the following questions: *Can we apply the predicates of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ to actions realized in virtual worlds? And if this turns out to be problematic, how can we explain our feeling of discomfort with certain types of virtual behaviour, i.e. our feeling that there is something not at all right about, for example, virtual rape?* Before I can answer these questions, three preliminary remarks should be made to avoid misunderstandings concerning their nature and scope.

First of all, a distinction should be made between two approaches to the problem of ethics and virtual technology. A first approach considers virtual technology as a *means* to realize non-virtual intentions, i.e. intentions that are not themselves situated in the virtual realm.⁶ When someone uses the internet as a means to pillage my bank account, for example, he or she does this because it *actually*, and not just virtually, makes him or her richer. The involvement of virtual media in this example does not really matter: we think of stealing as wrong, no matter what means are used to do it. A second approach, the one I am interested in here, focuses not on virtual technologies as a means to realize non-virtual intentions, but rather on their capacity to open up artificial environments in which we can realize actions that are *purely virtual*, such as hitting a computer generated tennis ball or engaging in virtual rape. Whereas the first approach addresses the problem of doing right or wrong *with* virtual media, the second one deals with the question of doing right or wrong *in* virtual worlds, or to be more precise, with the question: are the predicates ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ applicable to virtual actions?

The second remark is closely connected to the first and concerns the simulation and presence of human beings other than ourselves in the virtual environment. One should distinguish between virtual environ-

ments populated by characters that are controlled by actual human beings on the one hand, and on the other virtual environments in which the user is the only real human being around and all other ‘human characters’ are pure simulations controlled by the computer. This paper will focus exclusively on the last type of virtual worlds, i.e. on those in which *the user is the only actual person involved*. This is the case in the virtual worlds of *Grand Theft Auto 4*, for example, and the ‘rape game’, where all the ‘people’ I encounter are computer generated. I restrict myself to these kinds of virtual worlds, because I want to investigate the degree to which virtual actions can be judged right or wrong *as such*, abstracting from any non-virtual repercussions these actions might have if real others were involved, for example, and there were *extra-virtual* grounds to ethically judge virtual actions. Raping a virtual character controlled by a real person could then be labelled ‘wrong’, because it has unfavourable repercussions in the real world: it can upset, frustrate, and humiliate a real person ‘behind’ the virtual character. In this case, the virtual action is *instrumental* in realizing an ethically undesirable effect on a real person and is judged to be wrong on those grounds. I believe, however, that it is only when one abstracts from the presence of real others that the truly interesting problem arises: Why, for example, do acts of virtual rape disturb us if no real person is harmed by them?⁷

The third preliminary remark is likewise concerned with the exclusion of an extra-virtual ground that is often used in ethical reflection on virtual actions. One could argue that virtual rape or virtual murder are wrong, because engaging in these types of virtual behaviour can ‘morally desensitize’ the user, making it more likely that he or she will rape or murder someone in the real world. Issues surrounding the effects of indulging in virtual violence on our ability to pass ethical judgments in the real world will not be dealt with in this paper. This problem requires an empirical, not a philosophical approach: it asks how virtual media *de facto* effect ethical judgment.⁸ The questions I want to deal with here, however, do not concern problems of facts, but *a priori* problems: can *any*

virtual action – making abstraction from all repercussions it could have on real people or real things – *ever* be labelled right or wrong, or do virtual actions, *in principle*, escape ethical judgment?

Before I engage these problems, let me present a brief outline of the argument I will try to develop. In the first part, I will focus on the *necessary condition* for the application of the predicates of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ to virtual actions: an agent should have the possibility to act *freely* in the virtual environment. In the second part, I will endeavour to demonstrate that the fulfilment of this necessary condition is *not sufficient* when it comes to the application of the predicates of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ to virtual actions. The last part explains how we can still be uncomfortable with certain kinds of virtual actions, like virtual rape, even though we cannot label these actions ‘right’ or ‘wrong’.

II. FREEDOM AND PRACTICAL REASONING IN VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENTS

As in the real world, agents in virtual environments should be *free* for their actions to be labelled right or wrong in the strong sense.⁹ Of course, a certain degree of freedom is implied in every virtual world. The user does not passively watch events unfold but *acts*: he or she can drive cars, fire guns, or at least navigate through the artificial environment. Still, not all actions realized in computer generated worlds appear to be ethically significant. What can possibly be *ethically* wrong (or right) about driving a virtual car through a deserted town? Not every choice, like turning my virtual car to the right or to the left, is an ethical one. What kind of choices should a virtual environment allow for, such that the virtual actions realized in it can be formally suited to ethical evaluation? To answer this question, two kinds of practical rationality will be distinguished.

Most virtual environments only call for the kind of practical rationality that is usually labelled ‘instrumental rationality’. They set out a well-

defined *end* for the user to accomplish and the user acts rationally when he or she finds the most efficient *means* to achieve this goal. Think, for example, of the digital tennis game that challenges the user to beat a computer generated simulation of Rafael Nadal or Roger Federer. The user has to find the best way to accomplish this task, but there seem to be no ethical decisions involved in the process. A player is a rational agent when he or she performs virtual acts that bring him or her closer to the goal he or she wants to realize.

There is a second type of practical reasoning, however, which is featuring more and more frequently in virtual environments, especially in computer games. Users are increasingly being given free choice in matters that do not merely appeal to their capacity to deploy instrumental reasoning, but that appear to ask for a kind of ethical rationality. A good example of this is *Call of Duty 5*, a computer game that allows the player to experience some of the major battles of the Second World War through the eyes of a Russian soldier called Dimitri. It contains a simulation of Berlin perceived from a first-person perspective by the player, who has to navigate through the city's streets, trying to eradicate the enemy. Towards the end of the game, the player is confronted with a group of German soldiers who want to surrender. The player, however, is then ordered by the commander of his or her unit, a computer generated character, to shoot them. If the player refuses to obey, the commander will order some of his or her fellow soldiers to burn the surrendering Germans alive with Molotov cocktails. The designers of the virtual world of *Call of Duty 5* are obviously intending this scene to provoke some kind of ethical deliberation on the side of the user. What is the best thing to do here? Shoot the soldiers who are trying to surrender or watch them be burned alive because of our refusal to obey orders? The game gives the player the space to make a decision that cannot be made on the basis of instrumental rationality alone, i.e. a decision that does not allow for a reflection in terms of means and ends, since its outcome is completely neutral with regard to the achievement of any goal.¹⁰ The game presents

the player with a choice between two evils that cannot be made on purely pragmatic grounds.

An even better example of a virtual world that grants the player full-fledged freedom, is that of *Grand Theft Auto*. This game presents us with a virtual world in which the user has to carefully weigh pragmatic imperatives against ethical ones. Players are free, for example, to visit virtual prostitutes in the game, have intercourse with them, and beat them up afterwards to retrieve the money they paid.¹¹ In this case, players have to decide for themselves what is more important: the pragmatic motive of beating up the prostitute to get their money back – money that can be used for other purposes in the game, such as buying weapons – or refraining from an action that would be ethically condemnable if it were to be realized in the real world. The player is completely free when it comes to choosing between these options. This life-like freedom is implemented throughout the entire world of *Grand Theft Auto*: one *can* steal virtual cars, run over innocent pedestrians, and shoot police officers, but one does not have to. It is up to the user to decide if he or she wants to engage in these acts of virtual violence or choose to be a good citizen of the virtual New York City.

More and more computer generated environments allow the user choices in matters that seem to require more than instrumental rationality alone, thereby fulfilling the necessary condition for labelling the actions realized in these environments ‘right’ or ‘wrong’. Why not simply apply our daily, non-virtual ethical paradigms to virtual actions without further ado? Why not say that if one has the choice between beating up a virtual prostitute or refraining from it, the former is wrong and the latter is right? This would be in perfect agreement with our intuition that there is something not right about certain types of virtual behaviour, like rape and excessive violence. Why would the *necessary* condition to judge virtual actions, i.e. freedom of choice in ethically significant matters, not be *sufficient* to judge them in the same way we judge non-virtual actions?

III. THE PROBLEMATICAL STATUS OF VIRTUAL ACTIONS

A minor detour must be made in order to demonstrate what remains problematic with regard to the application of the predicates ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ to virtual actions. In this section I will sketch the contours of a phenomenology of the image that allows me to draw conclusions with regard to the ethical status of the actions realized in the virtual image-worlds of the computer.

From a phenomenological perspective we can describe acting-in-a-virtual-environment as a form of image-consciousness. We are intending objects, dealing with them, *through* a mediating object: the image.¹² It is only because of the computer screen that the virtual worlds of *Grand Theft Auto* and the ‘rape game’ can be disclosed. Image-consciousness is always characterized by *neutrality*, or the so-called ‘*as-if*’-modification, concepts that can easily be illustrated with a reference to photography.¹³ When I look at a photograph of my late grandfather, I *actually* perceive a grey, two-dimensional figure about as tall as my thumb. This object, the thing one actually perceives when looking at a photograph, can be called the ‘image-object’.¹⁴ *Through* this image-object, however, I intend the so-called ‘image-subject’: my grandfather, i.e. a tall man who was far from grey or two dimensional. I am only virtually perceiving him, however, since he passed away long ago and is permanently absent. Naturally, it would not make much sense to say I am seeing him; it is only *as if* I do. Hence, objects intended in image-consciousness are ‘beings-as-if’; they are not actually present, but only virtually ‘there’. This is all very obvious, no doubt, but the phenomenological concept of the ‘as-if’-modification may prove to be both more insightful when applied to the problem of virtual action, as we shall see.

It should also be pointed out that in image-consciousness, not only the objective correlates of my acts are neutralized, but also my mental acts themselves. Not only does my grandfather acquire the ‘as-if’-modality, my seeing him is also neutralized. My perception of the image-subject is a

perception-*as-if*, and something analogous applies to all mental acts directed towards an image. In his phenomenology of the image, for example, Edmund Husserl refers to the portrait of a suffering person. According to Husserl, we can feel pity for this depicted person, but only pity-*as-if*, not actual pity.¹⁵ Immersed in the artificial space of the image, nothing seems to actually matter any more, since the totality of conscious life – mental acts *and* objective correlates – is neutralized and put out of action.

Let us return to the problem of the ethical status of virtual actions with this more general analysis of the image in mind. I have discussed the effect of the ‘*as-if*’-modification on virtual *perception*, for instance the perception of a photograph. But how does it affect *actions* realized in the image-worlds created by the computer? I will argue that the ‘*as-if*’-modification challenges both consequentialism and deontology as paradigms for the validation of virtual action.¹⁶ My characterization of these paradigms may seem a little sketchy, but in order to reveal the full range of the ‘*as-if*’-modification, I cannot discuss all their particular variants.

Consequentialism judges individual acts by their consequences, by what they bring about. In a virtual environment, however, everything that is brought about is brought about ‘*as if*’. When I kill a character in *Grand Theft Auto* I do not actually kill someone, analogous to the photographic perception of my grandfather that never ‘hits’ an actual object. In the strict sense, nothing is ever really brought about in a virtual environment, which explains why one cannot be convicted for something like virtual murder. Perhaps we should resort to an ethical framework that focuses not so much on the outcome of actions – in virtual environments there are no actual outcomes – but on the *intentions* grounding them: *deontology*. As was shown, however, the ‘*as-if*’-modification not only encompasses the correlates of acts, it also includes the intentional acts themselves. When we ‘kill’ an innocent citizen in *Grand Theft Auto*, there was no intention to actually kill someone, it is only *as if* we are going to murder a human being. Actually, we are not pulling the trigger of a gun when playing. In reality, all we did was click the mouse of our computer.

This leads us into a further problem with regard to ethics in virtual environments. Immersion in these environments makes the question concerning the identity of the moral agent, and thereby the one concerning *responsibility*, highly problematic: whose intentions are we talking about? At first sight, it seems clear who is the subject corresponding to the ‘as-if’-intentions: *me*. Things are, however, slightly more complicated. Immersed in a virtual image-world, we do not merely leave the actual world behind us, we also leave our actual ego. Husserl makes a helpful distinction between the ‘actual I’ on the one hand and ‘the image-world-I’ [*Bildweltlich*] on the other.¹⁷ In *Call of Duty 5*, for example, I experience the downfall of Berlin through the eyes of Dimitri, who is my image-world-I. When playing the game I *become* Dimitri in a way. I respond, for example, to artificial teammates shouting “Dimitri, get over here!” by moving towards them. Whereas the *actual I* (me) is sitting in front of the screen in 2010 with his hands on the keyboard, the *image-world-I* (Dimitri) is in Berlin in 1945, with his hands on a rifle. Although one always identifies to a certain degree with the image-world-I, the actual I and the image-world-I are still separated by an abyss that makes it very hard to say who is accountable for possible virtual ‘wrong-doing’.

The neutralization implied in every form of image-consciousness modifies everything: intentions, consequences, and even the subject responsible for all these things. In virtual image-worlds nothing really ‘counts’: every virtual action escapes the grasp of ethical verdict. Does this imply that virtual environments constitute not so much an unethical, but rather an a-ethical domain of action? Are we ‘beyond good and evil’ once we have immersed ourselves in the virtual realm? Is the virtual an extra-ethical playground? But why then are we so disturbed by excessive violence or perverted sexual acts in virtual environments? Why are we not at ease with people engaging in virtual rape, even if we know well enough that they are *actually* doing nothing wrong?

IV. DISCOMFORT AND RELIEF

In this last section, a possible ground for our discomfort with certain types of virtual behaviour, like virtual rape, will be put forward. To explain this discomfort, a very subtle theory is required that does not overlook the ‘harmlessness’ of virtual actions, but still endeavours to explain why we are not at ease with people engaging in some such actions.

Throughout this paper I have separated two domains: the actual world and the virtual world. I have tried to argue that the predicates of right and wrong can apply to actions realized in the actual world but not to virtual actions. In order to explain why certain types of virtual behaviour discomfort us, however, these two domains – the actual and the virtual – have to be related to each other again. My hypothesis would be that we are discomforted by acts of virtual rape and virtual violence when they are performed by people who have lost track of the distinction between their actual I and their (immoral) image-world-I. It is the goal of this section to clarify and make plausible this rather subtle and complicated thesis. In order to do this, I will have to take a bit of a detour, leaving the high-tech world of the computer generated environment behind me for a while to consider a more traditional example of an artificial environment: the stage play.

Virtual worlds and stage plays have a lot in common: they are artificial environments crowded with image-world-I’s, acting out ‘as-if’-intentions that remain without real consequences. An actor is never really acting, i.e. never realizing actual practical intentions; he or she rather *depicts* the intentions and actions of the fictional character he or she is impersonating. The difference between the actor as an actual person and the character he or she depicts (his or her image-world-I) is mostly very clear. Consider an actor playing Brutus in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*: whereas the actor as an actual person stands in a theatre in Brussels somewhere in the twenty-first century, his image-world-I (Brutus) is in Rome somewhere in the first century. There are, in other words, obvious

distinctions between the actors as actual persons and the fictional characters they portray. These distinctions also exist at the level of feelings and intentions. As an actual person, the actor can greatly enjoy playing the villain Brutus and *actually intend* to portray this character as convincingly as possible. He does not, however, entertain any feelings of hatred towards ‘Caesar’ and has no intention of murdering anyone. This dubious intention to murder someone is being entertained, rather, by his image-world-I, Marcus Brutus.

In general, nobody considers it a problem when actors set out to portray murderers in a play, since it is clear that, as actual persons, they do not intend to murder anyone; no one will be harmed by their ‘actions’. The actor playing Brutus is not really murdering Caesar and the actor playing Caesar is not really a victim in need of medical treatment or a funeral. What the public sees when attending Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, is not a *murder* but rather a ‘*murder*’. When one does not know that one is looking at a play, however, the revelation of this distinction between murder and ‘murder’ can come as a relief. In the British comedy series *Blackadder III*, situated in the late eighteenth century, the Prince Regent – who is said to have ‘a peanut for a brain’ – attends a performance of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*. The moment Brutus comes up behind Caesar with a knife, he shouts: “Look behind you, mister Caesar!”, and after Brutus has murdered Caesar the Prince calls in the guards to arrest the actor playing Brutus. When he is told by his butler that it was just a play, and that the actor playing Caesar is standing upright on the stage awaiting applause, he is utterly relieved. The relief the Prince feels is, however, quite different from the relief one would feel when an *actual* attempt to murder someone has been made but failed. In the context of the theatre, the murder *is still there*, but it appears in a different light, in a new mode of presentation: the ‘as-if’-modification. Whereas the Prince first thought that something terrible and utterly condemnable was happening right in front of his eyes, he now suspends his ethical judgments in order to enjoy the play from an aesthetical point of view, applauding the actors playing

their parts so well as to make him believe someone actually had the intention to murder a fellow human being and succeeded in this plan. First, the prince was worried and not comfortable with what he saw, but now is *relieved* and able to enjoy the show.

Another example of an experience of discomfort succeeded by a moment of relief involves *rape*, or rather ‘*rape*’. Suppose I enter a room where a man is lying on top of a woman trying to rip off her clothes, while the woman is struggling and screaming for help. The man appears to be completely outraged, cursing at the top of his voice while pulling down his trousers. Of course, the behaviour of the man strikes me as ethically wrong and I might want to interfere in order to save a woman from being raped.¹⁸ Just in time, however, I notice that the three of us are not the only people in the room: someone else is there, shouting directions at the woman and the man: ‘Give me a little bit more anger!’ and ‘Can you struggle a little harder?’. By now it has occurred to me that I am not witnessing a rape, but a ‘rape’, i.e. a *re-enactment* of a rape. Whereas I first felt inclined to condemn the actions of the man lying on top of the woman, I now suspend all ethical judgments in order to enjoy the scene. Again, my experience started with a feeling of discomfort only to end in relief: it was all just a play. And where I would probably feel most uncomfortable being around a man who is raping someone, I am not at all discomforted being around the actor who depicts an outraged rapist, because I presume that this actor is completely different from the image-world-I he is depicting in the play. I even admire the actor for portraying a despicable person so convincingly. When depicting a ‘rape’, the actor entertains mental states that differ from the ones entertained by the rapist who is performing a rape – the actor is not really sexually aroused and has no intention to humiliate a real person – but he can still make it seem *as if* he is an enraged rapist and this is something we admire in the actor.

These examples of ‘murder’ and ‘rape’ seem to support the idea that actions-as-if, like virtual actions and theatrical actions, can never be labelled right or wrong. Although something ethically condemnable seems

to happen on stage – ‘someone is being murdered/raped!’ – our discomfort fades away to make place for relief once we are aware that it was ‘only a play’. We should, however, dwell a little longer on the example of the theatre, for I have left a possibility unexplored: a movement not from discomfort to relief, but the other way around: from relief to discomfort. The exploration of this other possibility might help us understand why we are so uncomfortable with excessive violence or sexual perversity in virtual environments.

Again, the theatre can provide us with good examples. Suppose the actor playing the rapist in a play is a friend of mine. I greatly enjoy his very convincing impersonation of the fictional character performing the rape. Afterwards I go backstage to congratulate him with this remarkable achievement. My friend, however, confesses something that does not strike me as comforting at all. He says that he was able to portray the rapist so well, because during the rehearsals he found out that enacting a rape *really* got him aroused. Even though my friend has not harmed anyone when enacting a rape, and does not have any intentions to rape actual people in the future, it is very unlikely that I will be able to watch him perform further rape scenes while admiring his qualities as an actor. Why not? Probably because he and his immoral image-world-I (the rapist) have become too close. My friend not only vividly depicts the actions and feelings of a rapist, he also entertains mental states similar to a sex offender: actual sexual arousal (maybe even accompanied by the bodily states that are an expression of this, like an erection). The strict distinction between his actual I and the ‘immoral’ image-world-I he depicts – a distinction we assumed to be present – has been blurred. It is the collapse of this clear distinction between the actual person and the fictional character with immoral intentions that is responsible for the uneasiness I feel when watching my friend portraying a rape.¹⁹ What started without any discomfort (‘my friend is portraying someone with different feelings and desires’) ended in uneasiness (‘my friend is actually aroused by something that would be condemned as wrong in the actual world’).

Bearing this last example in mind, let us return to our theme proper: the ethical status of virtual actions. Although I have argued that it is impossible to label virtual actions right or wrong, some of them seem not right at all. I have appealed to the somewhat vague concept of ‘discomfort’ to define our reaction to virtual actions such as raping a computer generated girl. The discussion of this concept of discomfort in the context of the theatre has hopefully contributed to its clarity. We feel discomfort when the clear distinction between the actual person and his or her (‘immoral’) image-world-I is lost because the actual I entertains the same feelings, emotions and desires as the image-world-I, even though he or she has *no actual intentions* to, for example, rape a real human being. The hypothesis I would like to put forward is that something similar bothers us about, for example, people engaging in virtual rape.

The problem we have with people enacting virtual rapes in a computer generated environment, is that we suspect them of not being in a disengaged state. We suspect them, in other words, of not merely *depicting* a rapist in a game, but of *feeling like one* when performing acts of virtual rape. Virtual rapists are probably not only aroused ‘as if’ by their actions; they are *actually* aroused. And this suspicion is strengthened in the light of a striking difference between the theatre and the virtual world. The actor presents an immoral character to a *public* and is, in a way, playing for this public. Users of a virtual environment, however, are not playing for a public but only for themselves. The player of the Japanese rape game, for example, does not portray a rapist to convey something to an audience, and this makes it very probable that his or her only reason to engage in artificial rape is that he or she is actually aroused by it. This causes the distinction between his or her actual person and his or her image-world-I to *collapse*. In a way, these two distinct personalities start to coincide, which makes the virtual action more than just virtual. The knowledge that someone has engaged in virtual rape does not make us feel uncomfortable because it actually harms someone – it does not – but because we think that someone doing this is actually aroused by it. This

makes it very hard to say that the person in question is merely depicting a rapist in the virtual world. It is more likely that he or she feels like a rapist, and this, as was made clear by the example of the theatre, is far more dubious and less playful than ‘merely’ portraying a rapist.

Since the argument I am trying to develop here is quite complicated, a brief recapitulation might be welcome at this juncture. It seems intuitive that actions performed in artificial environments and theatres escape ethical verdict: no one can be harmed by such an action, nor are there any actual intentions to harm someone at the basis of these actions. But we also have the intuition that certain kinds of virtual actions are not right at all. In this section, I have tried to explain where this feeling of ‘wrongness’ might come from. I have argued that the feeling emerges once the clear distinction between an actual person and his or her immoral image-world-I is being blurred because, for example, the feelings of the actor playing a rapist are identical with the feelings an actual rapist entertains (‘sexual arousal’). Something analogous is true of users of virtual environments: we are not at ease with people engaging in virtual rape – even though we know well enough that they are *actually* not doing anything wrong – because we suspect them of entertaining actual feelings of arousal, feelings also found in a real rapist.

Implicit in this argument is that there are no actions-as-if that are *in themselves* discomfoting. There is nothing intrinsically wrong in portraying a rapist in the context of a theatre play or a virtual world. It could even provide us with valuable experience of what it is like to engage in condemnable activities. Also, it is not the case that virtual rape is ‘worse’ than virtual murder, as some presuppose.²⁰ I have developed an argument referring to the subjective dispositions, or ‘mental states’, of the actual person ‘behind’ the virtual action. Not only in the case of virtual rape but also in that of virtual murder can we feel uncomfortable when an agent is consumed by his or her virtual actions to a degree that makes it impossible to distinguish the actual person from the image-world-I. There is something discomfoting about someone who imagines him/herself to be a killer,

instead of ‘merely’ depicting one in the context of the theatre or a computer game. Most players of violent computer games, however, seem to be aware of this distinction. They do not think of themselves as killers and there is still a wide enough gap between themselves as actual persons and their virtual incarnations in the computer generated world. Although they are immersed in their virtual actions, there is still consciousness of this immersion and of the abyss separating the virtual and the actual. They may be depicting unethical acts, but they do not entertain the same mental states as actual murders (aggression, rage...). The fact that these ‘virtual murderers’ usually do not feel any guilt or shame seems an indication that they have not done anything wrong. One can imagine, on the other hand, how virtual rapists might feel guilt and shame after being actually sexually aroused by harassing the virtual girls populating the environment of the Japanese rape game. In this last case, the image-world-I is starting to ‘contaminate’ the real person behind it: the unethical virtual character is not neatly separated from the actual person any more. This leads us into an ethical zone best described as ‘grey’: strictly speaking it is not wrong to be aroused by something that does not harm actual human beings and is not founded on an actual intention to do so, but still, entertaining the same feelings as an actual rapist does seem to harm one’s ‘character’. It seems, in other words, ‘better’ not to entertain these feelings.

It should be pointed out that we do not only find ourselves in this ‘ethically grey zone’ when performing ‘unethical’ actions in a computer generated environment. Similar problems arise in the context of the theatre or with regard to imagination. Is imagining strangling one’s boss wrong? This ‘action’ does not harm anyone, but we would still feel uncomfortable around people entertaining these fantasies on a regular basis, especially when they combine them with feelings of actual aggression or rage. This paper can be regarded as an exploration of this grey zone of ethics through a focus on the ethical status of actions realized in the unreal image-worlds of the virtual environment. I realize that my account of these actions might have some loose ends, but I hope to have

provided at least some distinctions that can be instrumental in disentangling the fascinating problem of unreal actions.

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NOTES

1. I would like to thank the three anonymous reviewers: both the content and the clarity of this paper has benefited greatly from their comments. Also, I am indebted to professor Kendall Walton (University of Michigan) for discussing with me, both in conversation and correspondence, the problem of ethics in fictional environments

2. For more elaborated definitions regarding the nature of the virtual environment see: De Mul (2002, 169-182), Heim (1998, 4-8), Wiesing (2005, 120-123)

3. Wonderly (2008, 1): “In virtual worlds, players can do many things that, in real life, would be impossible.”

4. In *Grand Theft Auto 4* the player incarnates Niko Bellic, an ex-Yugoslavian. The players can engage in all kinds of criminal activities such as assassination and car theft. They can, however, also drive around the computer generated environment killing innocent bystanders at random. Wonderly describes the game as following: “Players encounter many personalities in the course of their GTA missions. Most are not enemies, but merely represent average citizens walking about the town. Players are free to target these unsuspecting virtual characters as well. One can shoot, bludgeon, stab, and even set fire to any man or woman who happens to cross his path” (2008, 2).

5. Article in the Belfast Telegraph, accessed on September 8, 2009 from: <http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/local-national/amazon-selling-3d-rape-simulator-game-14183546.html>

6. For an elaboration of the first approach see: Spinello (2006).

7. I should thank one of the reviewers here for drawing my attention to the distinction between virtual characters controlled by another human being and virtual characters controlled by the computer.

8. Since the mid-eighties research evidence on this topic has been accumulating progressively. A meta-analytic review of the empirical psychological literature is presented in Anderson and Bushman (2001). This empirical stance is also advocated by Wonderly (2009, 8-9). A critical assessment of case studies concerning violent computer games in general is provided by Sicart (2009, 188-204).

9. I add ‘in the strong sense’ here because ‘murder’, for example, is of course never ‘right’ and always to a certain degree wrong, but if I am not free to choose between different alternatives, I cannot judge one of the alternatives to be better than the other, i.e. I cannot deploy any practical reasoning whatsoever, which makes it harder to ethically judge or condemn the actions I am performing. I cannot be held responsible for my judgments I do not have any choice.

10. I take the distinction between instrumental and practical rationality from Miguel Sicart, who argues in his book on the ethics of computer games that playing computer games requires ‘ethical skills’ and is not a matter of ‘winning’ (i.e. instrumental rationality) alone. See: Sicart (2009, 3-5 & 39).

11. This example I take from Sicart (2009, 57).

12. Husserl (2005, 27).

13. Husserl (2005, 617).

14. Husserl (2005, 47-48).

15. Husserl (2005, 554-555). It is quite clear that Husserl is thinking of a painting of a fictional suffering figure, not of a photograph or a television image. In the case of television, for example, his assertion concerning the ‘as-if’-quality of our pity becomes more problematic. In an article on empathy, Iso Kern points out that: “The best method of getting us to sympathize and thereby to help consists of showing the images of the suffering of human beings on TV. When we see the images, we are usually struck by the misery on display, and swayed towards helping these suffering people” (Kern 2008, 709). Kern’s point would be, in other words, that the TV image does not provoke us to fill empathy as-if or pity as-if, but real pity and empathy. I am not entirely sure this is true. Perhaps what we feel when we see all kinds of misery passing by on the

TV screen is very similar to the ‘pity and fear’ we feel when watching a play: the suffering of another human beings affects us, but often does not cause us to *interfere* and the feeling of pity and fear doesn’t last; when we have turned the TV off or have left the theatre, we can very easily forget the terrible thing we saw and go on with our lives. These observations seem to support Husserl’s idea of the image as evoking ‘neutralized’ mental acts and contents, even when it comes to the TV image.

16. A similar argument is made by M. McCormick in his article ‘Is it wrong to play violent video games?’ (2001).

17. Husserl (2005, 556).

18. An analogous example is given by Walton (1990, 192-195).

19. Of course, the portrayal of fictional characters in plays and movies can benefit greatly from actors that are willing to identify with their characters, even when it concerns characters with intentions that are generally considered to be immoral. But this process of identification, also known as ‘method acting’, presupposes that an actor *chooses* to start feeling or behaving in a certain way and can also *choose* to stop feeling or behaving in a certain way after she has delivered her performance. But this is not always the case, and than even method acting might become a problem from an ethical point of view. It seems to be highly problematic, for example, when an actor impersonating Hitler has identified with this character to a degree that he actually starts to hate Jews when playing, and cannot wait for the moment he can impersonate Hitler again.

20. Luck (2009, 33-34).