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Between death and suffering: resolving the gamer's dilemma

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Abstract

The gamer's dilemma, initially proposed by Luck (Ethics and Information Technology 11(1):31–36, 2009) posits a moral comparison between in-game acts of murder and in-game acts of paedophilia within single-player videogames. Despite each activity lacking the obvious harms of their real-world equivalents, common intuitions suggest an important difference between them. Some responses to the dilemma suggest that intuitive responses to the two cases are based on important differences between the acts themselves or their social meaning. Others challenge the fundamental assumptions of the dilemma. In this paper, we identify and explore key imaginative and emotional differences in how certain types of in-game violence are experienced by players, consider how these differences factor into the moral lives of players, and use these insights to resolve the dilemma. The view we develop is that the key moral emotion in offensive video gameplay is self-repugnance. This is not repugnance of the act one directs a game character to perform in the game, nor repugnance of the character one plays. It is repugnance of oneself in playing the game. If self-repugnance is a fitting emotional response to playing a videogame, then this is prima facie grounds for thinking it is wrong to play the videogame. Our approach to the gamer's dilemma is to distinguish the fittingness conditions of self-repugnance from the fittingness conditions of other moral emotions as they pertain to playing videogames. We argue that because of the virtual character of the actions performed in video games, self-repugnance is a fitting response to particular kinds of offensive gameplay. On the other hand, in-game murder is not invariably a fitting ground for self-repugnance. We argue that this difference is grounded in imaginative responses to the harm of death and the harms of profound suffering. Our task is to explain and justify this difference in fittingness conditions and use this to resolve the gamer's dilemma.

Keywords Videogame ethics · Gamer's dilemma · Self-repugnance · Moral emotions

Introduction

A central concern of videogame ethics is to explore the significance of videogame play for the lives of players and distinguish key moral differences between types of in-game activities. There are important differences between the types of virtual violence that players experience during gameplay. While some in-game violence is generally shrugged off as harmless fun or experimentation and no occasion for serious moral disapprobation, other in-game violence falls afoul of widely accepted standards of moral decency. The gamer's dilemma, initially proposed by Luck (2009) and a recurrent focus of debate within the field, posits a comparison between in-game acts of murder and in-game acts of paedophilia within single-player videogames. Despite each activity lacking the obvious harms of their real-world equivalents, common intuitions suggest an important difference between them. There has been a range of responses to the dilemma. Some suggest that intuitive responses to the cases are based on important differences between the acts themselves or their social meaning. Others challenge the fundamental assumptions of the dilemma. In this paper, we identify and explore key imaginative and emotional differences in how certain types of in-game violence are experienced by players, consider how these differences factor into the moral lives of players, and use these insights to resolve the dilemma.

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The original gamer's dilemma

The appropriate scope and formulation of the gamer's dilemma have been points of contention in the literature, but its original presentation by Luck (2009) offers an effective entry into the debate. Luck's original formulation of the gamer's dilemma involves a comparison between in-game acts of murder and in-game acts of paedophilia. An in-game act of murder has the player directing their character to kill a computer-controlled character under simulated conditions that would be considered murder if performed in the real world. This excludes instances of simulated wartime violence and justifiable self-defence. It also excludes instances of simulated killing that are too far removed from realistic contexts to be reasonably described as simulated murder [e.g., Mario shooting a fireball at a koopa troopa after eating a fire flower in Super Mario Bros (Nintendo, 1985)]. Another important constraint is that the murdered character does not respawn i.e., they are killed permanently and do not reappear alive later in direct continuation of that same game world. An in-game act of paedophilia involves the player directing an adult character to perform acts on a computer-controlled child character under simulated conditions that would be considered paedophilic if done in the real world. It is the moral comparison of these two types of acts that forms the basis of the dilemma. Luck notes that many videogame players commit in-game acts of murder and do not consider this morally problematic because it is not real murder and no real victim is harmed.[1] He then very plausibly suggests that most players would not be comfortable committing in-game acts of paedophilia and would find such gameplay reprehensible, despite such acts also failing to harm a real victim. The dilemma, as originally presented, is this. Players must either identify a moral difference between in-game acts of murder and paedophilia, accept that in-game paedophilia is permissible, or accept that in-game murder is impermissible.[2]

Controlling for context

To identify the core of the gamer's dilemma, it is important to account for the range of contextual factors that may affect the meaning of in-game acts. Ali (2015) and Ramirez (2020) each appeal to contextual differences in the structure and presentation of in-game murder and in-game paedophilia

as the key determinants of an action's permissibility. Their interrogations of potential contextual factors help to strip away distracting counterexamples and facilitate a focused conception of the gamer's dilemma.[3]

Ali (2015) rightly states that in early treatments of the gamer's dilemma, interlocutors appealed to story-rich or sport-like videogames for examples of acceptable virtual murder while turning to open simulation videogames to illustrate unacceptable instances of in-game paedophilia.[4] Roughly speaking, videogames with strong storytelling and sport-like structures each have internal motivational contexts (narrative performance and competition) that may mitigate player responsibility associated with any in-game acts when the game is played as intended. Alternatively, simulation videogames present a game environment that affords a high degree of player agency in the evaluation and pursuit of goals. Ali argues that this agential difference, i.e., the wilful choice to pursue and perform such actions when the option to act otherwise is available, informs appraisals of the permissibility of such acts. Further, he suggests that once this consideration is accounted for, not all acts of in-game murder are permissible and not all acts of in-game paedophilia are impermissible. As an example, Ali appeals to virtual murders that are pursued for their own sake within a simulation game as impermissible and non-explicit virtual paedophilia performed out of narrative necessity in a storytelling game as permissible. On our view, the structural presentation of in-game acts and their relationship to player agency are important aspects of fair moral evaluation, but there is still an important intuitive difference when murder and paedophilia are compared in equivalent contexts. This appears to be the case whether the contrast occurs within competition structures, unfolding interactive narratives, or open simulations.

Ali's own example of a narrative-driven act of virtual paedophilia illustrates the point. The example involves a player controlling Kratos from the *God of War* (2005–present) franchise in a hypothetical scenario. In the original versions of the game, Kratos is a powerful demigod who wreaks vengeful havoc on the Greek pantheon by systematically battling and murdering the gods.[5] Ali imagines an alternative version in which Kratos is able to seek vengeance

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[1] The lack of an actual human victim is the basis on which Luck claims many players would believe that in-game murder is permissible. It is likely that other factors influence the appraisal of such acts, some of which we will explore later in the paper.

[2] In a later paper, Luck (2022) rephrases the issue as a paradox rather than a dilemma. We discuss this later paper in Sect. 5 below.

[3] Ali (2022) revisits the dilemma to distinguish between distinct kinds of it: representational, gaming, and simulation.

[4] Ali does not suggest that specific videogames fit precisely into one of these three categories, narrative, sport, and simulation, but that the structural presentation of specific games will tend to favour one in particular moments.

[5] The 2018 and 2022 titles shift focus to Norse mythology and gods, where Kratos' attitude and motivations are notably different from the earlier Greek instalments and are thus best set aside for our illustrative purposes.

on a god by molesting their child rather than directly attacking them. Ali stipulates that once initiated, the actual act of molestation occurs offscreen so that the moral significance of the in-game act is not confused with the representation of virtual child pornography.[6] Ali suggests that this is a case of an immoral act performed by an in-game character that may not represent impermissible gameplay because the player is merely advancing through the narrative as demanded. However, Ali does not address the experienced difference between playing his hypothetical version of *Gods of War* and playing the actual game. When compared within the same structural contexts, virtual murder and virtual paedophilia are still experienced very differently, and it seems that there will be many cases in which this makes a significant moral difference.

Ramirez ([2020](#)) attempts to dissolve the gamer's dilemma by arguing that it over-emphasises the content of a game without accounting for the influence of the game's style in creating realistic player responses. He argues that Luck's original definition of virtual murder and paedophilia—that in-game acts of murder or paedophilia would be identified as murder or paedophilia if undertaken in the real world under similar circumstances—fails to distinguish between distinct gameplay experiences. Gameplay experiences that are highly similar to a perpetrator's experience in the real world are described by Ramirez as virtually real experiences. Ramirez supposes that virtual paedophilia is almost always presented in a style that facilitates a virtually real experience of the act, whereas virtual murder is seldom presented in this way. He further contends that in-game acts of virtual murder experienced as virtually real are likely to be judged as morally wrong, whereas in-game acts of paedophilia experienced as virtually unreal are less open to moral condemnation, and in this way, he hopes to dissolve the gamer's dilemma. Ramirez's attempted dissolution of the dilemma has merit but does not succeed. To understand why it is necessary to interrogate his examples and more closely examine the idea of virtually real game experience.

Ramirez proposes two factors impacting whether gameplay is experienced as virtually real: perspectival fidelity and context-realism. He suggests, quite plausibly, that higher degrees of either will be more likely to produce virtually real experiences. Perspectival fidelity is the degree to which the sensory experience of an in-game character aligns with that of the player. The visual aspect of this perspective alignment includes the player's field of view (e.g., viewing through a distant screen or VR headset), character perspective (first-person or third-person), and the presence

of meta-information in the in-game interface (character health, inventory, score, mini-map, etc.). Auditory elements that impact the realism of the experience include the mix of diegetic and non-diegetic sounds (soundtracks and voiceovers are likely to detract from fidelity). Haptic and proprioceptive factors can also have an impact on perspectival fidelity (pressing a button to issue a command versus performing a gesture that mimics in-game action). Context-realism is not concerned with the alignment of player/character perspectives but rather with how closely the narrative and worldbuilding elements of gameplay align with the real world of the player. Factors that impact this include whether the laws of the game world mimic the natural laws of physics, whether the in-game setting is far removed from the player's experience of the real world, and whether the computer-controlled characters within the game world act as if they are motivated by, and responsive to, coherent reasons.

Ramirez uses two key examples in his attempt to dissolve the dilemma: one of morally permissible virtual paedophilia and one of morally impermissible virtual torture. The first example we have already discussed. It is Ali's ([2015](#)) hypothetical instance of virtual paedophilia by Kratos. Ramirez concludes that this gameplay is morally acceptable because it is unlikely to facilitate a virtually real experience.[7] Ramirez's second example is taken from the *By the Book* mission from *Grand Theft Auto 5* (Rockstar North, [2013](#)). In this mission, the player alternates between controlling two of the playable characters: Michael and Trevor. Michael is staking out a distant house party through the scope of a sniper rifle, waiting for identifying information about a terrorist he intends to assassinate. Trevor is interrogating a confidante of the target using torture techniques. Trevor's segment incurred serious moral criticism from players, and critics (Bramwell, [2014](#); Hern, [2013](#)) because it facilitates a virtually real experience of perpetrating torture. Compared to many other segments of the game, the scene has high perspectival fidelity; there is an absence of non-diegetic sound and meta-information, and the button configurations required of the player mimic the physical gestures of the torture techniques. The character being tortured also begs for mercy and even flatlines at one point (he is hooked up to a heart monitor), so the player must revive him before continuing the interrogation. This establishes a high level of context-realism. It is a morally problematic and distressing scene, and Ramirez draws a parallel between it and virtually real experiences of murder. He argues that its context-realism and perspectival fidelity make it morally unacceptable

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gameplay, just as high levels of context-realism and perspectival fidelity can make virtual murder impermissible.[8]

The *By the Book* mission has another twist. After receiving unreliable information from the torture victim, the player—now controlling Michael, who is receiving the information via radio—fatally shoots their best guess of who their terrorist target might be, likely aware that they are killing an innocent. Michael's segment has comparable perspectival fidelity and context-realism, yet it has not received analogous moral criticism. Rather than dissolving the gamer's dilemma, this example of virtually real experiences of violence introduces an alternative presentation of the dilemma: why does it seem morally permissible to virtually murder a potentially innocent character but not morally permissible to virtually torture a character? We will revisit this question later in our discussion, but first, we describe a way of narrowing the gamer's dilemma to accommodate for the contextual factors described by Ali and Ramirez.

Ceteris paribus, how low would you go?

Montefiore and Formosa (2022) develop a narrow version of the gamer's dilemma that controls for the contextual factors identified by Ali and Ramirez. They imagine a hypothetical videogame called *How Low Will You Go?* with two modes: murder mode, which involves frequent acts of virtual murder, and molestation mode, which involves frequent acts of virtual paedophilia. They describe the progression of each mode as follows (Montefiore & Formosa, 2022, pp. 8–9):

> Both modes are always equally positioned contextually, or as closely as possible, to the other (i.e., various contextual features, including degrees of player agency, perspective fidelity, context-realism and so on, are all kept the same for both modes). As you progress through the game, say from level one to level ten, the contextual scales are dialled up for both modes at the same time. On Ali's in-game context scale, the game type moves from being an unobjectionable storytelling game with almost no player agency, to a somewhat objectionable storytelling game with limited agency, and eventually becoming a simulation game granting gamers almost unlimited agency. On Ramirez's scale of simulation design, the virtual actions move from being positioned in a highly pixelated two-dimensional arcade-style game, with eight-bit music and low over-

all perspective fidelity, through a series of gradual intermediary steps, to a highly simulative game with no non-diegetic sound or game mechanics that undermine its highly detailed context-realism. This involves a gradual shift from a game that does not produce virtually real experiences for the gamer to one that, at higher levels, does so to a very high degree.

Montefiore and Formosa, like Ali, Luck, and Ramirez, continue to frame the dilemma in terms of permissibility and make the following claims about player progression through *How Low Will You Go?* First, they suggest that at the lowest levels of progression, where player agency, perspectival fidelity, context-realism, etc., are very low, participation in both modes will be permissible. They then propose that at the highest levels, where contextual factors encourage virtually real experiences, both modes would be impermissible. However, they claim that somewhere throughout the scale of progression (they imagine around level 6–7 out of 10), a point will be reached where players are comfortable playing the murder mode but not the molestation mode, i.e., molestation mode will be perceived as impermissible before murder mode. This conception of the gamer's dilemma isolates the fact that, at some point, context-independent moral differences between experiencing acts of virtual murder and virtual paedophilia will exist. This returns the discussion to the crux of the problem: what are those differences?

A grave resolution

Recognising that there do seem to be important and fundamental differences between virtual murder and virtual paedophilia, Luck (2022) reformulates the gamer's dilemma. His reformulation includes a broader range of virtual experiences and offers what he coins the grave resolution. Luck proposes that the original gamer's dilemma is a specific instance of a more general paradox: the paradox of treating wrongdoing lightly. As opposed to being a specific feature of videogame play, Luck points out that the puzzle extends to all areas of fiction, regardless of how interactive they are. He asks why it is that audiences would be generally okay with watching *Midsomer Murders* but not *Midsomer Molestations*. He points out that many people happily participate in murder mystery parties but would steer well clear of paedophilic practitioner parties.

Luck's explanation of differences in moral judgment of fictional wrongdoing is that some acts (like paedophilia and torture) are very grave matters and ought not to be treated lightly, whereas other acts (like murder) are not as grave, and thus, in the right circumstances, may be treated more lightly. The buck here appears to have been passed to a new question: what makes some fictional acts grave enough to

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[8]   Ramirez does note that the example is technically not murder, but suggests it is still a fitting example to illustrate his point because torture is not as bad as murder. While this is likely true, it does not account for important differences in how they are experienced as gameplay. See our discussion of the same example below.

be off-limits while others lack gravity and may be treated lightly? What is the formula for gravity? Discussion of the gamer's dilemma has brought up some candidate differences, and Luck endorses several of them as potentially contributing to the gravity of fictionalised acts. Such differences include general implications for the moral character of the player (Bartel, 2020), bases of desire and motivational differences for playing each game type (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, 2020), and the incorrigible social meaning of specific acts and the associated attitudes towards them being fictionalised and consumed for entertainment (Patridge, 2011, 2013). Such responses to the dilemma present some relevant considerations for understanding differences between types of in-game violence, but we believe that they miss something important. They fail to explicitly get to grips with a fundamental feature of the experience of fictionalised wrongdoing: a player's fitting emotional response to their playing of the game and their empathetic sensitivity to suffering. That is not to say that some responses to the dilemma are incompatible with the view that we develop. Bartel's (2020) application of virtue ethics to the dilemma, while focused on volitional factors and the cultivation of immoral desire, presents a framework that recognises the importance of moral emotions and sensitivities. Patridge (2011, 2013) also recognises that player sensitivity to certain represented acts is central to understanding the dilemma, although her account focusses on sensitivity to the social meaning of such acts as they relate to the historical moral reality for victim groups. What such responses leave out is the key difference between fitting emotional responses to death and to suffering caused by violation.

Self-repugnance

Emotional responses to our own wrongdoing are a fundamental element of our moral personality and themselves an object of moral appraisal. Moral emotions such as guilt and remorse play an important function in our moral lives. Like other emotions, moral emotions can be felt appropriately or inappropriately. When they are felt appropriately, they can be described as fitting emotions, and an important part of the analysis of emotions is the identification of fittingness conditions for them (Naar, 2021). For example, it is inappropriate or unfitting to experience remorse for a minor failure of social proprieties, such as forgetting a person's name you were recently introduced to. Remorse is too strong and too serious an emotion to be spent on such a thing. To feel remorse is to feel pained by the wrong one has done to another. The fitting response to forgetting a person's name, by contrast, is social embarrassment and apology, both soon forgotten.

Remorse is a fitting response to committing murder. A murderer who fails to feel remorse compounds their moral failure. They fail twice, as it were. Remorse is a fact-sensitive emotion. If, while driving and texting, you run over a pedestrian, then remorse is fitting. But if you discover that you had not run over a person, but a roll of carpet left on the roadway, then remorse is no longer fitting. Remorse involves dwelling upon the wrong you have done another (Proeve & Tudor, 2010, Chap. 2). However, in this case, there is no wrong to another to dwell upon. You may feel guilty about your distracted driving, ashamed of yourself, relieved that your negligence did no harm, and so on, but remorse for killing is not fitting because you have not killed.

This means that remorse is not a fitting emotional response to actions taken in a single-player videogame. Even if you murder someone in the game, there is no actual person killed and so no grounds for remorse. But what other moral emotion might be in play here? Moral repugnance is one such emotion, and it turns out to be crucial to understanding the gamer's dilemma. Moral repugnance is a form of disgust, a strongly negative emotional response to morally inflected states of affairs. It can take as its object either character traits or actions. The cold-blooded indifference to life of a professional killer is an example of a morally repugnant character trait. Violation of a person is an example of a morally repugnant action. Violation of a person is an assault on their bodily or psychological integrity apt to cause significant long-term suffering and moral injury. Sexual assault and rape, torture, bullying torment, and paedophiliac abuse are all examples of personal violation. All are fitting objects of moral repugnance. Moral repugnance can be directed at oneself, in which case we call it self-repugnance. Self-repugnance is more than moral self-disapproval; it is a matter of finding oneself repulsive.

We pointed out above that remorse is a fact-sensitive moral emotion. Its fittingness dissolves if the facts of harm turn out to be illusory. We argue that self-repugnance is not a fact-sensitive moral emotion in this way. Self-repugnance is a form of disgust, and the representation of a disgusting scene can be itself disgusting, even if it is an invention. For example, a fictional representation of vivisectionist experiment on a dog is apt to elicit disgust even if we understand it to be fictional. This disgust is fitting; it is an appropriate response to what is depicted. It is often fitting to feel disgust towards depictions of disgusting events even if they are not real. In such cases, the representation itself suffices to make feelings of disgust fitting.

Because moral repugnance is an especially strong and morally inflected form of disgust it is not fact-sensitive. Consider our example of the depiction of a vivisectionist experiment. Moral repugnance is appropriately directed at the (fictional) perpetrators of the experiment; spectators tend to, and ought to, find the actions of the vivisectionists in the

depiction not just viscerally disgusting, but morally repugnant. But what is the appropriate response if we learn that the vivisectionist's actions are controlled by someone else? In this case it would be fitting to feel moral repugnance of the controller. In a game context, the controller is the player themselves and moral repugnance of the vivisectionist's actions transforms into moral self-repugnance. Of course, a player may be immune to such intense and morally inflected self-directed disgust, but our claim is that it is fitting that players in such circumstances find their virtual actions to be morally repugnant.

Our basic response to the gamer's dilemma is this. Gameplay is impermissible if it generates the fittingness conditions for profound self-repugnance in players. The repugnance in view is not repugnance of the character one plays in the game, or repugnance of what is done in the game, but self-repugnance in playing the game. Even if a player feels none of this, the fittingness conditions may be in place for self-repugnance, and if they are, they suffice to make the gameplay impermissible. Gameplay involving murder is not on these grounds impermissible, whereas gameplay involving paedophilia generally is. To make this argument, we need to show why it is that in-game murder need not be a fitting object of self-repugnance, whereas in-game child sexual abuse is.

Is there really a difference between the self-repugnance fitting to murder and the self-repugnance fitting to paedophilia? Murder and sexual assault of children are both, after all, profoundly wrong. Why should one disgust us more than the other? The answer, we claim, emerges from the difference between the two wrongs.

Death and suffering

Murder causes death; paedophiliac assault causes profound suffering. And death is very different from suffering. Death is personal annihilation. It is the annihilation of a person's meaning, striving, and pleasure; it is the undoing of their hopes, exaltations, and loves. Causing the death of a person is probably the greatest harm that can be done to them, and for this reason, murder is an act of enormous moral significance and a fitting occasion of the most profound remorse. However, the harm of death is a peculiar thing. If we are right to assume that death is personal annihilation, then all the harms of death (to the one who dies) are deprivations. The dead are deprived of life and everything good and bad that comes with it. Their deprivation is radical; unlike the deprivation of someone denied a promised gift, the dead are not an experiencing subject of deprivation. Since the dead are no more, they are not capable of experiencing their deprivations. They are, we might say, deprived non-beings,

mere absences. Most importantly, the dead do not suffer and cannot suffer.

This is a familiar philosophical claim about death. It derives from Epicurean arguments about the non-harm of death (Epicurus, 1926; Luper, 2009; Suits, 2001). Epicureans thought that the dead cannot be harmed; their deprivations are not, in fact, harms at all. To be harmed, one must be able to experience harm. The dead cannot experience harm, so they cannot be harmed. Any number of philosophers have taken issue with this Epicurean argument, arguing that deprivations are harms even when not experienced (Feinberg, 1984; Nagel, 1970). From our point of view, it suffices to say that the harm of death is *sui generis*. It is a kind of harm no person has or ever could experience. It consists of becoming a deprived non-being.

By comparison, suffering is an all too familiar harm. And suffering is sometimes profound in the sense that it has ripple effects throughout a person's life, making life difficult and sometimes tormented.[9] Violations of a person, such as in sexual assault, involve profound suffering culpably inflicted and are cause for extreme moral condemnation. They are very grave matters. Paedophiliac assault is an extreme violation and generally causes profound suffering. When the gamer's dilemma draws our attention to the contrast between fictionalised murder and the fictionalised sexual assault of a child, it contrasts two distinct kinds of harm: the harm of death and the harm of violation. The difference between them matters.

Human beings are sensitive to the reality of suffering in a way that they are not sensitive to the reality of death for a very good reason. The harm of suffering is vividly imaginable; the harm of death is not imaginable at all. For example, when attempting to convey the profound loss that death entails, we are often drawn to the suffering of those who survive. We are generally very sensitive to the suffering of the bereaved. If a person dies alone and unloved, our minds tend to turn in sorrow to the idea of their dying alone and in pain or to the possibility of their lonely suffering before death, not to the loss—the deprivation—which their death entails. We look everywhere but at the harm of death itself. This is because the deprivations of the dead are not coherent objects of imagination. There is nothing which it is to experience death's deprivation, so there is nothing which it is to imagine the harm of death.

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[9] Formosa calls the harm of profound suffering "life-wrecking" (Formosa, 2008). We avoid the term because it is apt to be misinterpreted. Those who suffer profoundly do not have their lives wrecked as a building may be wrecked by a storm. The consequences of the harm done to them stay with survivors of profound suffering and may continue to have a baleful and damaging effect on them. Still, survivors of profound suffering have great and powerful stories to tell, as well as horrific ones.

The difference between emotional responses to suffering and emotional responses to death makes profound emotional sense. It would be incoherent for us to emotionally respond to the two in the same way because they have very different imaginative constituents. We noted above that profound remorse is a fitting emotional response to the act of murder and it involves dwelling upon the harm one has done another. This means that the remorse fitting to murder is a dwelling upon the deprivations one has inflicted on another. This is a complex cognitive accomplishment. It is not a matter of imagining the fate of the suffering dead. (One reason that stories of our response to the dead often take the form of ghost stories is that ghost stories are a way of giving us imaginative access to something otherwise unimaginable).

Murder and violation

A murderer causes the death of another, and their fitting remorse consists of a persistent and painful dwelling on all that is lost to the person they have killed. (By comparison, feelings of guilt, also fitting, are a dwelling upon the supreme moral violation they have committed). What of self-repugnance? Ought not the murderer feel self-repugnance? This depends upon how the murder relates to their character and moral personality. If the act was desperate, out of character, if they felt immediately guilty and remorseful, then perhaps not. If the murderer acted with depravity, out of malice or contempt, if they respond to their actions with indifference, then self-repugnance is only fitting. This is repugnance of one's character, a profound disgust of whom one has become.

What changes when we move from experiences of real-world murder to in-game murder? Remorse drops out of the picture. There is no life deprived, so there are no fitting grounds for the player to feel remorse for what they have had their in-game character do. What about repugnance? The computer-generated character one has killed in the game does not, in the world of the game, continue to suffer. In murder, there is no ongoing suffering. The suffering of the murdered ends definitively at the moment of death. Moral repugnance is a fitting response either to repugnant character, in which case it is appropriately directed at the game character, not the player, or it is a fitting response to the spectacle or imaginative reconstruction of ongoing suffering, which in murder does not occur. An in-game act of murder is not, therefore, necessarily repugnant. It can, in the right contexts, be taken lightly by players of the game, and in doing so, the players are not exhibiting a pernicious indifference to the moral significance of murder. They are responding with fitting emotion to their playing of a game.

Now compare this to the in-game sexual assault of a child. This is a profound violation of the child, the kind of act that is apt to cause long-lasting suffering and moral injury. Death has no afterlife, but the sexual assault of a child (and sexual assault in general) has a long and painful legacy. This doesn't mean that the harm of death is less than that of child sexual assault. It means that the harm of child sexual assault is available to witness and imaginatively reconstruct in a way that the harm of death is not. Child sexual assault is a fitting object of moral repugnance. Gameplay in which a player directs their character to sexually assault a child has the player direct their character to do something profoundly repugnant. The repugnance of an action ordered generally infects the one ordering it. Special circumstances aside, it is repugnant to have your character do something repugnant.[10] So, a player, in directing their character to sexually assault a child, would themselves be acting repugnantly. They are not merely directing their game character to act repugnantly; they are acting repugnantly in so directing their game character. Self-repugnance is the fitting emotional response to directing one's game character to sexually assaulting a child.[11]

The difference between the two sorts of in-game actions identified in the gamer's dilemma comes down to fitting emotional responses to the playing of the game. A game of murder may be taken lightly, i.e., played without any feelings of self-repugnance. A game of paedophilia may not be. Let us illustrate the distinction we are drawing with a non-paedophile example. Substituting torture for paedophilia (torture is another fitting object of moral repugnance), consider the *By the Book* mission from *Grand Theft Auto 5*. You are playing Michael. As Michael, you are under orders to assassinate a terrorist at a party across the street. You can see people at the party, but not all that well. You do have a clear shot if you need it. Eventually, your compatriot—Trevor—gives you a description of the terrorist. It's pretty vague. You make your best guess and shoot someone at the party who more or less resembles the description. What should you feel about what you have done in directing your character to shoot? If the analysis we have given is correct, it would be unfitting

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[10] Circumstances in which repugnance of a directed action fails to entail repugnance of the direction include cases in which the person directing the action has no choice or faces a tragic choice and is otherwise well motivated. Although these situations can be replicated in a game world so that, for example, a game character faces a tragic choice between sexually assaulting a child and saving the village, we doubt this exculpation extends to the player. Unlike the game character, a player has an off button ready to hand.

[11] Repugnance or disgust may be generated by associated pleasure responses. As Kjeldgaard-Christiansen (2020) points out, the likely circumstances in which a player engages in virtual paedophiliac activity involve desires and pleasures that themselves tend to prompt disgust. Our point is slightly different. What makes repugnance a fitting response to virtual paedophilia, rather than merely a psychologically typical response, is the violation involved in a paedophiliac assault, together with the torment and suffering it engenders.

to feel self-repugnance at this point in the game. There is no real basis for such a feeling. You should, of course, recognise—and feel—that what you have directed your character to do in the game is wrong in the game. It is a reckless and unjustified killing in that world. But there is no basis for you to dwell on the fate of the life you have extinguished (that character's fate ends with his death) and so no grounds for you to feel self-repugnance. You have been playing a game, taking a moral holiday.

Now imagine you are playing Trevor on the same mission. As Trevor, you torture an unnamed man in the game, someone who is helpless, strapped to a chair, and begging for mercy. You have your character inflict profound suffering on this man. At one point, his heart gives out, and your character must revive him to continue his torment. How should you feel about what you have had your character do? Should you feel self-repugnance? Yes, exactly. This is the fitting emotional response to your having your character torture another person. Such fittingness derives from your sensitivity to suffering vividly portrayed and your imaginative capacity to envision its aftermath. In directing your character to do something as repugnant as this, you earn yourself self-repugnance. The self-repugnance is directed at the cause of the vividly portrayed suffering, and this is you (through your character, but you). Self-repugnance here is not a judgment based on the fact that someone is really being hurt and you are causing it, but a fitting emotional response to the witness and imaginative reconstruction of violation and profound suffering.

Conclusion

Other things being equal, gameplay is wrong if it grounds fitting and profound self-repugnance. If this general principle holds, the gamer's dilemma can be resolved by examining the conditions of fitting self-repugnance. Playing a game in which your game character violates others and, in doing so, inflicts profound suffering on them generally grounds fitting self-repugnance. Playing a game in which your game character murders another generally does not.

Our argument intersects with Montefiore and Formosa's game *How low would you go?* in the following way. Montefiore and Formosa claim that the stage of the game at which murder would be deemed impermissible occurs at a higher—e.g., more realistic, more agential—level than the point at which paedophilia would be impermissible. Their point is that we are more morally sensitive to paedophiliac games than to murder games, and this sensitivity persists through changes in game construction and gameplay experience. Our argument suggests an answer to why this is the case and why it is justified. Paedophiliac games and murder games generate distinct emotional responses; these are rational responses

to the harms of suffering and the harms of death. Virtual paedophilia is grounds for self-repugnance. Virtual murder need not be any such thing. Because we are more sensitive to fictional suffering than to fictional death, our repugnance to paedophilia comes online in less realistic contexts than our repugnance to killing.

Luck seeks to resolve the gamer's dilemma (or the paradox of taking wrong-doing lightly) by evoking a distinction between what is grave and what is less so. In our resolution of the dilemma, Luck's concept of gravity is a function of fitting emotional responses to fiction and play. A very grave wrong is one that fittingly evokes a strong emotional response to violation and the suffering it causes. A less grave wrong is one based on the reality of harm but resists an imaginative emotional response to that harm. A less grave wrong is still wrong, profoundly so, but its fictional representation or enactment is not fittingly repugnant. These fictions are not something we naturally feel bad about, and if they cause no harm, either to ourselves or others, they are not wrong.

The gamer's dilemma highlights the significance of moral emotions in our lives. Intuitively, it seems obvious that games of paedophilia are obnoxious in a way that games of murder are not. However, it has proved difficult to work out exactly why our judgements ought to line up this way. In our view, the dilemma, in its various forms, is generated by contrasting moral emotions and the conditions under which they are fitting. It is not a mere quirk of human nature or social convention that we prefer to play at murder than paedophilia; it is a rational response to the wrongs of murder and paedophilia themselves.

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