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# Real Intentions and Virtual Wrongs

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Claremont McKenna College

# Real Intentions and Virtual Wrongs

submitted to  
Professor Dustin Locke

by  
Elaine Sohng

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# 1 RAPE IN VIRTUAL REALITY

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As virtual reality (VR) technology evolves and becomes increasingly accessible, we must address several moral dilemmas. How should we behave and evaluate our actions in virtual reality? Do our actions in virtual reality have “real” consequences? What is the relationship between our physical and virtual selves? One of the most notable dilemmas involves the gamer’s dilemma, as evaluated by Morgan Luck, or the inability to find a clear moral distinction between virtual murder and virtual pedophilia. Several attempts have been made to find a principled distinction that condones virtual murder but finds virtual pedophilia to be morally reprehensible. This philosophical puzzle may seem abstract, but the implications of the gamer’s dilemma will create guidelines for how we conduct ourselves in a new plane of reality that may very well become a common household commodity.

We could also completely divide virtual reality from physical reality; moral characters and evaluations should not transfer between the two – but imagine that your friend is a virtual reality enthusiast. One day, they mention that they have raped a character in a virtual reality game. This is shocking as they previously condemned rape in the “real,” that is, physical world. They believe there is no “real” harm in virtual rape because no “real” person affiliated with their victim. Your friend reminds you that our conception of rape depends upon the violation of someone’s bodily integrity and autonomy. The characters your friend interacts with are sets of pixels and so do not have the ability to have bodily integrity or autonomy.

However, even without there being a “real” victim, there seems to be something wrong with engaging in virtual rape. Is it possible that the wrong of virtual rape does not depend upon the consequences and impact on a victim, but rather in the act itself? This question calls for a departure from our current conception of rape. It asks us to question the relationship that we have created between committing wrongs and perpetuating harm. The case of rape in virtual reality highlights the need to reexamine the ways through which we find certain actions to be morally reprehensible.

I am not equating virtual rape to physical rape. In fact, I believe that several facets of rape in virtual reality are ambiguous and must be clarified as virtual reality becomes increasingly accessible and mainstream. Firstly, when do we consider virtual acts to be “real” and what exactly happens to the self when one enters virtual reality? Focusing on virtual rape, what is happening when your friend rapes a non-playable character in virtual reality? How does it differ from physical rape? What is the relationship between harm and committing wrongs? Most importantly, what makes virtual rape wrong?

I plan to focus on the last four questions I have posed. It is my goal to 1) explain what occurs when one engages in virtual rape; 2) identify relevant moral differences between physical rape and virtual rape; 3) challenge the existing relationship between committing harm and wrong in the case of rape; and 4) argue that virtual rape is morally reprehensible due to the agent’s intention to utilize a person as a mere tool for pleasure.

Ultimately, I hope to solve a modified version of the gamer’s dilemma where virtual pedophilia is expanded to a more generalized category: virtual rape. By virtual rape, I am referring to any actions occurring in VR that would be considered to be rape if they took place in PR. Additionally, I believe broadening the scope of virtual pedophilia to virtual

rape, or rape in VR, allows us to address immediate concerns such as women who have already reported being groped in virtual reality (Belamire).

To accomplish these goals, I will first define the virtual landscapes and characters at play. I will then introduce Morgan Luck's response to the gamer's dilemma. Next, I will analyze Stephanie Patridge and Christopher Bartel's responses to the gamer's dilemma. Patridge and Bartel focus on virtual rape and virtual pedophilia in traditional, flat screen video games but I believe their arguments are applicable as they provide interesting connections between virtual wrongs and real harm. I will then explore how consent operates in virtual reality by utilizing rape fantasies and rape pornography as parallel cases. I will then argue that an agent's intentions extend into virtual reality in a way that reveals their moral character. Specifically, regarding virtual rape, an agent's intentions are morally wrong.

### 1.1 THE GAMER'S DILEMMA AGENTS, CHARACTERS, AND LANDSCAPES

For this thesis, virtual reality (VR) refers to virtual landscapes that are fully immersive and have first-person perspective such as that offered by Oculus Rift, HTC Vive, and PlayStation VR. Physical reality (PR) refers to the ordinary world we all live in day to day. The parameters of VR as we have defined it mean that there exists only one player in VR. This player, the agent, controls their character, or avatar. All other characters are sets of pixels integrated into the virtual landscape. The avatar is dependent upon its user to have any motivations or actions. In addition to the player's avatar (player character), non-playable characters (NPCs) are automatically generated. They are not controlled by

any “real” person in PR but are programmed to perform or behave in certain ways. In our case, I will assume that NPCs are neither sentient or prone to developing sentience.

Our NPCs exist only within the virtual world. As NPCs have no well-being, they cannot be harmed or made worse off. They experience no true pain, and there are no lasting effects such as flashbacks. I want to argue that thinking of harm in this way, to be made worse off, is distracting to the current issue of the wrongs of virtual rape. I will not argue that NPCs feel pain or should be treated as human. I agree that NPCs are not harmed when they are virtually raped. Instead, I want to discover the relationship between harm and engaging in virtual rape. When an agent rapes an NPC, is there someone being harmed and if so, who and how? However, firstly, should the wrongs of virtual rape be contingent upon harm?

## 1.2 THE GAMER’S DILEMMA

In “The gamer’s dilemma: An analysis of the arguments for the moral distinction between virtual murder and virtual paedophilia,” Morgan Luck objects to five possible arguments that claim to solve the gamer’s dilemma. As in our case of virtual rape, the victim of virtual murder is a computer-controlled adult-NPC and cannot respawn. Luck focuses on instances of “clear” pedophilia and murder, or cases where the agent would be deemed a pedophiliac or a murderer if they committed their VR actions in PR.

First, Luck challenges the idea that social norms should dictate whether a virtual action is acceptable or unacceptable. Social norms dictate that virtual murder is acceptable. However, the stigmatization of pedophilia makes it unacceptable in PR or VR. Luck argues

that relying upon social acceptability is an explanation of our intuitions concerning virtual reality and not a moral justification for virtual murder.

The second argument, “Significant likelihoods,” is consequentialist in nature. It presumes that instances of virtual murder do not result in an increased probability of PR murders, but the opposite is true for acts of virtual pedophilia. In other words, individuals who commit acts of pedophilia in VR are more likely to commit acts of pedophilia in PR. “Significant likelihoods” argues that any act which is likely to result in harm is immoral, but there is little to no empirical evidence supporting the premises of this argument. Some arguments claim that condoning virtual pedophilia may lead pedophiliacs to satisfy their desires in VR as opposed to PR. This argument would create a moral obligation for individuals to engage in virtual pedophilia.

His third argument challenges Aristotelian arguments that are concerned with potential injuries to the agent’s character. To enjoy virtual pedophilia indicates that one may enjoy physical pedophilia. Thus, you would be harming yourself as this is a pleasure that damages one’s moral character. It is important to note that virtue-based arguments do not identify an inherent wrong with the action of virtual pedophilia. Furthermore, this argument claims that individuals partake in virtual murder not because they find virtual murder pleasurable but to satisfy their competitive nature. Luck finds this argument improbable as it is very likely that certain individuals who engage in virtual pedophilia are not satisfied by virtual pedophilia itself. For example, a game where one must steal Crown Jewels from the Tower of London may necessitate the seduction of a Beefeater’s fifteen-year-old daughter (Luck 34). Completing this action does not indicate that one finds virtual pedophilia enjoyable but rather wishes to win the game. This argument fails as it neither

proves that agents do not enjoy virtual murder for its own sake nor show that all agents engaging in virtual pedophilia enjoy it intrinsically.

According to the fourth argument Luck explores, we believe virtual pedophilia is wrong because it targets a specific group of people: children. This argument finds virtual pedophilia to be wrong as virtual pedophilia is discriminatory. This seems to be a plausible argument. After all, we would consider games that focus on murdering members of the LGBTQ+ or Muslim communities to be wrong as they would also be discriminatory. Games that allow for virtual murder, such as *Grand Theft Auto*, are not discriminatory but rather allow anyone to be murdered. However, Luck finds this unsatisfying as games that condone sexually harassing or molesting people of all ages would be just as permissible as games that allow individuals of all ages to be murdered. Luck does not explicitly challenge the connection between real wrongs and harm, as I will later on, but he does find that the focus on victims as opposed to the agent to be unsatisfying.

Luck's fifth argument focuses on the special status children hold in moral evaluations. This argument would imply that child murder is worse than adult murder just as child molestation would be worse than adult molestation due to the *ceteris paribus* clause. However, it is not clear if child molestation is worse than adult murder as molestation and murder are not equivalent. If we discard the *ceteris paribus* clause and claim that harm against children is always worse than harm against adults, we arrive at unwanted conclusions. We are now forced to claim that spanking a child is worse than molesting an adult or that, as Luck states, stealing a child's lollipop is worse than murdering an adult (Luck 35). These strange conclusions weaken this argument, according to Luck.

### 1.3 CONSENT IN VIRTUAL REALITY

The definition of rape as conceptualized in PR depends upon many things, including but not limited to the state of the perpetrator, penetration of the body, the ability for the victim to have consented (Office of Public Affairs). Rape in PR occurs to a victim; there must be someone who has experienced an assault. Rape in PR is wrong because it has harmed someone. Rape in VR does not happen to anyone as agents rape a set of pixels that constitute the NPC. As a result, my analysis of virtual rape will focus on the agent and their intentions.

I want to acknowledge that the American legal system agrees with the necessity of a victim in physical rape, most notably in cases of attempted rape (Office of Justice Programs). The legal system seeks to provide justice for potential victims who have not given consent. However, as NPCs can never consent in VR, what are our guidelines for distinguishing when sexual encounters in VR are rape?

#### 1.3.1 Parallel Cases: Rape Fantasies and Rape Pornography

Virtual rape occurs in an imagined reality which is controlled by agents who engage in rape through virtual characters; agents create their online or virtual personas. Often, they can choose how their avatars will look in terms of hair color and eye color, how they will dress, and what accessories they will carry throughout the game. This relationship between agent and character can also be seen in PR rape fantasies and rape pornography, where individuals engage in a representation of rape via character. Through these analogous cases which I later expand upon, I hope to discover how agent realize their intentions through

their avatar. Can an avatar's intentions differ from the intentions of the player controlling it?

### 1.3.2 Tokens of Consent

Consent requires both a willing mental state and communication of that mental state to make sexual relations permissible. However, NPCs lack the ability to give consent so are all acts of virtual rape? Can we compromise and require stereotypical communications of consent, such as nodding or affirmative verbalizations? However, some scenarios look like rape or consensual sex. We can argue that an agent can assess whether they would have been given consent when engaging in virtual sex, but to reduce consent and rape to physical representations is misleading. Instead of focusing on how consent is conceptualized and given, I want to focus on the agent. Does the agent desire to receive consent or is it of no importance to them? It might seem that we should focus on games where sexual encounters appear to be nonconsensual, but I believe that, for our evaluation, the appearance of the sexual encounter should come second to the motivations of the agent.

## 1.4 UNDERSTANDING INTENTIONALITY

What is the intention behind virtual rape? The increased agency of VR allows for intentions to be fully realized. When an agent enters VR, they inhabit, interact with, and react to a new world. Additionally, the agent's body is more directly translated into the virtual environment, enabling them to engage with the virtual landscape. Each experience is unique because it is open to all possibilities, within the technical limits of the game, and

social mores or legal consequences do not constrain players. They are empowered to act as they please.

The intention, then, is transferred from agent to character, making a character's intentions equivalent to an agent's intentions – and vice versa. This occurs due to the dependent nature of the character upon the agent. The avatar is the mechanism through which agents interact with virtual landscapes. Through the avatar, they realize their goals. However, is it possible that intentions are not only realized through our avatars but also affected by them? Does an avatar have any impact on how an agent feels or sees the world? Should we consider the actions and persona of the avatar to be equivalent to that of the agent? These questions are an attempt to better understand how the wrongs committed by an avatar can reflect both intention and accountability towards its user.

## 1.5 NEXT STEPS

What happens when an agent rapes a character in virtual reality? I want to identify: 1) what makes this behavior morally wrong; 2) the relationship between committing a wrong and harm in cases of virtual rape; 3) the role of intentionality in virtual rape; and 4) potential applications to the gamer's dilemma. I will first answer the most relevant questions I have introduced above. I plan to first respond to two challenges to the gamer's dilemma from Stephanie Patridge and Christopher Bartel. Their arguments do not deal directly with rape in VR, but their discussions concerning pedophilia and murder in video games provide a solid basis for discovering why virtual rape is wrong. Unfortunately, I find their arguments are unsatisfying. Patridge's argument cannot account for the increased agency present in VR nor can it separate moral wrongs from harm. As a result, virtual acts

are only “wrong” when they harm a marginalized group, and the actions are not inherently wrong. Bartel’s argument also does not help us identify the inherent wrong of acts such as virtual rape or pedophilia; it ties moral wrongs to harm.

I will attempt to fill this gap, focusing on how intention, as opposed to harm, plays a vital role in helping us identify the wrongs of virtual rape. I will first identify the role that consent plays in virtual representations of sex and rape. Next, I will focus on how intentionality plays a key role in understanding the wrongs of virtual rape. I will then distinguish what makes rape fantasies in PR and rape pornography morally permissible whereas engaging in virtual rape is not. I will explore how one’s avatar reflects one’s PR intentions and desires in a way that makes the agent eligible for moral evaluation, and ultimately moral blame. Finally, I will attempt to answer the gamer’s dilemma, comparing virtual rape for virtual murder.

## 2 HARM & REAL WRONGS: A RESPONSE TO STEPHANIE PATRIDGE

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An amoralist understanding of violence in video games argues that engaging in violent video games cannot be a real wrong as video games are mere fiction. These claims imply that events taking place in virtual reality are not real as they, presumably, lack PR consequences and connections to our moral character. When we apply this framework to virtual rape, we are forced to conclude that there is nothing wrong with engaging in virtual rape.

Stephanie Patridge challenges against this amoralist perspective, arguing that video games have an “incurable social meaning” when video game imagery reflect PR oppression. Engaging with such imagery reveals a lack of sympathy that makes one eligible for moral evaluation. Her argument can help us understand whom Patridge believes is harmed by virtual rape. However, I am concerned about her argument’s inability to account for the wrong of actions in and of themselves. I believe identifying the inherent wrong of virtual rape can help us better understand why engaging in virtual rape is morally suspect.

To analyze Patridge’s argument, I will first explain what it means for an image to reflect a PR phenomenon as well as how that reflection connects to moral virtue. I will then explore her concept of “incurable social meanings,” concluding that she provides a compelling explanation as to why engaging in morally questionable virtual scenarios make one eligible for scrutiny. Finally, I will apply Patridge’s account to VR to see how it can help us better understand the connection between harm and committing real wrongs.

## 2.1 VIRTUAL REFLECTIONS OF PHYSICAL REALITIES

Patridge argues that images reflect and perpetuate oppression present in PR. She introduces this claim with an imagined image of former President Barack Obama eating a watermelon as well as *Custer's Revenge*, a video game that simulates the rape of a Native American woman. Although the victims of these images are not “really” harmed or “real,” respectively, Patridge argues that their real-life models are harmed. In this section, I will explore: 1) why and how images are insulting; 2) how images reflect and perpetuate PR oppression; 3) the differences between perpetuating and portraying oppression.

### 2.1.1 Offensive Imagery

For those who have grown up in the United States, it is likely we understand the origins and social significance of the images Patridge introduces. When Americans examine the image of Obama eating a watermelon, it carries a deeper significance than it does for non-Americans. Such an image targets Obama as a Black American and has historically targeted members of that community. Patridge notes that an image of another Black American eating watermelon would also be offensive to Obama and this specific community because all community members are targeted by this image and what it symbolizes. Reproducing and distributing this image both reflects and perpetuates a PR phenomenon.

*Custer's Revenge* is an adult entertainment video game where players control a naked cowboy who engages in sexual relations with a Native American woman tied to a pole. This image cannot be separated from the historical use of rape as a means of war and hostility towards indigenous peoples of North America. According to the Rape, Abuse &

Incest National Network (RAINN), one in six women in the United States is a victim of rape whereas one in three Native American women will be raped in her lifetime (Patridge 310). *Custer's Revenge* reflects the widespread violence experienced by Native American women. It is offensive because it sexualizes violence and players who understand this sociocultural context should understand why such imagery, and engaging with such imagery, is offensive.

### 2.1.2 The Incurable Social Meaning of Representations of Harm

Stephanie Patridge's concept of incurable social meanings helps us better understand the relationship between images and harm. According to Patridge, an image has an "incurable social meaning" when there are limited ways in which it can be interpreted. As a result of its limited potential interpretations, it is evident to an agent when an image reflects an oppressive feature of PR. Images with incurable social meanings reflect and contribute to the "egregious, long-term, systematic denials of justice that are of a particular kind: oppression" (Patridge 310). Oppression is of moral concern as it denies individuals the respect they deserve as human beings. It is wrong to enjoy representations of such harm and as victims of oppression are denied their human rights by others, it must be "others who must accord them [the] dignity" that has been denied (Patridge 311). Thus, agents who engage in oppression willingly and continuously have a severe lack of sympathy. There is a moral obligation for agents not only to sympathize with the realities of oppression that others face but also to not contribute to that oppression by endorsing it. Agents who do so are "tone deaf to an obvious feature of our moral reality" (Patridge 310). Patridge believes this inability and unwillingness to empathize makes an agent eligible for moral evaluation.

Patridge identifies a moral duty: agents should understand the specific context or morally offensive imagery. As a result, it would be morally wrong for Americans to produce caricatures of Obama eating watermelon whereas it would not be as morally reprehensible for non-Americans who cannot understand the sociocultural context. Asking players to be cognizant of their actions is not unreasonable but rather asks them to cultivate self-awareness. To be willfully unaware of oppressive PR phenomena perpetuates oppression as it validates mindsets that lead to physical and structural violence. When we apply this to virtual rape, it is possible that it is wrong to engage in virtual rape as it continues PR oppression that contributes to rape. Thus, according to Patridge's argument, it is wrong to perpetuate rape against those who suffer from it in PR.

### 2.1.3 Contextualization

What happens when we remove the cultural contextualization that Patridge relies upon to identify incorrigible social meanings? An image of an alien eating watermelon would not be considered offensive given that aliens have not suffered PR racism. Could we say the same of a video game that ended with the rape of an alien? We understand that games such as *Custer's Revenge* are wrong as they reflect and condone systematic denials of justice of Native American women. It seems then that if an agent played a game where they virtually raped an alien or a non-disabled heterosexual white man, we should question their moral character just as we would question the moral character of *Custer's Revenge* enthusiasts.

However, incorrigible social meanings depend upon oppression. It seems then that raping any character in any form of *Custer's Revenge*, including the white man we have

previously discussed, is wrong as it denies the rights of that individual. However, is the virtual rape of someone from a privileged social location truly a product of oppression? As Patridge has defined oppression, it is the systematic denial of a group of peoples' rights in PR. Engaging with images that have incorrigible social meanings endorses oppression, validating and perpetuating that harm. It seems then that this account does not include individuals who do not experience oppression in real life. They cannot experience oppression in VR because they do not experience it in PR. There is no preexisting form of oppression to perpetuate or to endorse. In other words, Patridge's account depends on an individual's experience of oppression in PR. The wrongs of virtual rape connect to physical harm which only falls upon those who experience systematic denials of rights in PR.

Patridge provides a satisfying explanation as to what occurs when we engage in certain representations of harm. Her account relies upon the existence of victims, specifically victims who are already marginalized. However, this is alarming because if PR phenomena are indeed reflected in video games and virtual reality, Patridge's account neglects potential and existing victims. Patridge has also not answered what is wrong about the action itself. If we can identify the inherent wrong of virtual rape, we can also acknowledge potential victims of virtual rape who are not from marginalized social locations.

### 3 VIRTUAL PORNOGRAPHY & VIRTUAL RAPE: A RESPONSE TO CHRISTOPHER BARTEL

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I believe rape in VR is an extension of the gamer's dilemma, or the inability to identify a clear moral distinction between virtual murder and virtual pedophilia. Remember that virtual pedophilia is a form of virtual rape, so when all virtual rape and virtual murder occur, there are supposedly no "real" consequences of victims. However, as we have seen from Patridge's account, virtual wrongs do have PR consequences. I want to now clarify the connection that exists between harm and committing real wrongs when analyzing virtual rape.

In "Resolving the gamer's dilemma," Christopher Bartel challenges Morgan Luck's conclusion that virtual pedophilia and virtual murder lack a relevant moral distinction. Bartel finds that Luck overlooks pedophilia's connection to virtual pornography. As child pornography harms individuals, so does virtual pedophilia. Bartel expands upon Neil Levy's argument that mainstream pornography eroticizes women's inequality. Bartel ultimately finds that virtual pedophilia harms women and is thus morally objectionable. This connection creates a distinction between virtual murder and virtual pedophilia, condemning virtual pedophilia but condoning virtual murder. When we apply Bartel's argument to our case of virtual rape, it is possible that rape in VR has a connection to pornography that makes virtual rape wrong.

I will first briefly outline Bartel's critique of Luck's response to the gamer's dilemma. I will then evaluate Bartel's claim that virtual pedophilia is equivalent to virtual

pornography. Finally, I will expand the connection he draws between virtual pedophilia and harm to women to better understand the wrongs of rape in VR.

### 3.1 BARTEL'S DISTINCTIONS

Bartel attempts to answer the gamer's dilemma by arguing that virtual pedophilia is equivalent to child pornography, as both require representations of sexual acts involving children. As child pornography is morally objectionable, so is virtual pedophilia. To analyze Bartel's argument, I will first explore the relationship Bartel establishes between virtual pedophilia and child pornography by identifying what constitutes pornography. I will then address Bartel's inability to account for the increased agency present in video games and virtual reality. I will finally analyze his claim that virtual pedophilia harms women, seeking to identify if the connection between harm and committing wrongs is necessary.

#### 3.1.1 Defining Pornography

Bartel argues that virtual pedophilia and child pornography are equivalent in that they are both dependent upon images of children engaging in sexual acts. However, images of sexual relations are not always considered pornographic and contemporary images that are not intended to be pornographic as consumed as such. For example, *Sports Illustrated* and Victoria's Secret lingerie catalogs are not produced to be pornographic but are often used as pornography (Bartel 14). The videos of Park Seo-Yeon, a woman who reported making \$9,000 a month for simply eating on camera, are often consumed for sexual gratification although they are not sexually explicit in any way (Huffington Post). It seems

that for an image to be pornographic, it must be consumed by the majority of its viewers in a sexual way. Sexually explicit images of children are not only produced with pornographic intentions but are also consumed as such.

I agree with Bartel: how the agent discovers such images is unimportant. What is important is that they voluntarily choose to engage with such imagery, transforming it into pornography to be consumed for the agent's pleasure. They enjoy the images intrinsically, and their pleasure depends upon sexual arousal. As such, it seems fair to equalize virtual pedophilia and child pornography as it is both intended and consumed to be sexually arousing for the majority of its users.

### 3.1.2 Harm to Women

Bartel identifies women as the victims of both virtual pedophilia and virtual child pornography. He also argues as “no actual child is harmed by either” virtual pedophilia or virtual child pornography (Bartel 15). I am interested in his first claim and concerned with his second; I also believe that Bartel's belief that the wrongs of virtual pedophilia must be tied to harm is misleading. I will first explore his two claims before arguing that the implications of his argument allow for virtual acts that we should find morally reprehensible.

I will first explore Bartel's claim that mainstream pornography harms women before addressing its application to virtual pedophilia. Bartel argues that women are harmed by mainstream pornography as it eroticizes inequality as it presents women as “sexually submissive objects for the enjoyment of men” (Bartel 15). In PR, pornography portrays women in degrading or humiliating scenarios for the pleasure of men. Bartel's

argument must create a connection between mainstream pornography, virtual pedophilia, and virtual child pornography as well as prove how virtual pornography perpetuates the inequality inherent to PR pornography.

Firstly, in what ways are virtual pedophilia, virtual child pornography, and mainstream pornography similar and different? As we have previously discussed, they are all manufactured and consumed for sexual gratification – but this only argues what we already know: all three can be considered pornographic. However, Bartel argues that all three validate inequality, specifically women’s inequality. Mainstream pornography features mainly women in sexually degrading acts, as victims of sexual violence, and as recipients of sexual aggression. Women then are not only harmed in the production of pornography but are also harmed by the consumption of pornography, as it eroticizes their inequality.

Bartel overlooks the stigmatization of child pornography and links it to mainstream pornography because both eroticize inequality. The unbalanced power dynamic inherent to child pornography is a form of inequality that is sexualized for and by viewers. As virtual pedophilia is equivalent to child pornography, engaging in virtual pedophilia is to engage in the eroticization of inequality. Children do not experience an unequal status in society, as women do, so they do not suffer from the inequality inherent to mainstream and child pornography. It follows from Bartel’s argument that women, not children, are harmed by virtual pedophilia because it sexualizes the inequality they experience in PR.

I find this argument to be similar to the fourth and fifth arguments Luck explores in “The gamer’s dilemma.” The fourth argument stated that virtual pedophilia is wrong because it exploits children, who occupy a special status in our moral evaluations. The fifth

argument claims that children hold a special status in moral evaluation. However, the fifth argument depends upon the *ceteris parabis* clause which we found to be unsatisfying as it claimed that any harm that fell upon children would automatically be considered worse than any harm that fell upon an adult. By retaining the *ceteris parabis* clause, we could permit pornography that depicted members of privileged social groups in degrading sexual situations. Thus, when we apply Bartel's argument to virtual rape, it seems that virtual raping someone from a privileged social group is acceptable. Representations of harm, according to Bartel and Patridge, perpetuate harm only to peoples who are marginalized in PR. The need to relate virtual wrong to PR harm is misleading, distracting us from the inherent wrong of sexualizing inequality or engaging in representations of sexual harm. The implications that follow from Bartel and Patridge's arguments highlight the inability of their arguments to explain why virtual rape is inherently wrong.

## 4 INTENTIONALITY AND REAL WRONGS

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We have yet to identify the wrongs of rape in VR despite exploring compelling arguments from Stephanie Patridge and Christopher Bartel. Both Patridge and Bartel focus their arguments on victims, whom all belong to marginalized groups in society. These prior arguments do not find a moral fault with rape in virtual reality unless it is linked to harm in PR. The inability to disconnect the connection between harm and virtual wrongs prevents us from finding the inherent wrongs that exist in engaging with virtual rape. In this final section, I will argue that virtual rape is inherently wrong and does not need to be connected to harm in PR to be considered morally reprehensible. I will first argue that an agent's desires and intentions extend into VR in a way that makes the agent accountable for the virtual acts they commit, regardless of whom they harm. I will then analyze the case of Elizabeth Xan Wilson and Joel Rene Valdez, two individuals involved in a controversial rape case in Texas, to further emphasize the role that intentionality plays in making an agent morally accountable for virtual rape. Next, I will compare two parallel cases: rape fantasies in PR and rape pornography. Finally, I will attempt to identify a moral distinction between virtual rape and virtual murder to answer a generalized version of the gamer's dilemma.

### 4.1 AGENCY AND MORAL ACCOUNTABILITY

I believe that players can most fully realize their desires in virtual reality as opposed to physical reality. Firstly, I want to highlight the physical agency one experiences in virtual reality. When an agent enters virtual reality, they are fully immersed in a new

landscape. Virtual reality is not merely what is directly seen by the agent; the 360-degree aspect of VR creates a new world. In this new world, the physical body is integrated into the virtual body or the body of the avatar. The avatar's body is responsive to the mind's intentions just as the body would respond to the mind's intentions in PR. For example, when the agent utilizes the HTC VIVE, the movement of their arms corresponds to the movement of their avatar's arms. The agent has the desire and thought to move their body, they do so in PR, and this action is replicated in VR. This level of bodily integration empowers the agent to interact with their fully immersive environment more easily. Secondly, I believe that the specific type of virtual reality we have envisioned is where the agent is most empowered. There are no legal, societal, or physical consequences to one's actions in VR. After all, there currently does not exist a governing body that regulates behavior in VR. Additionally, as all other characters are NPCs, there is no one to challenge the agent's demands or desires. The agent can fully realize their intentions as every other character and object exist for the agent's pleasure.

If the agent is using the game for its intended purposes, that of finding pleasure, what is morally reprehensible about the way the agent chooses to utilize the game? The moral issue stems from the agent's intention to engage in rape. Whether the rape is a representation or a physical engagement, it signifies the desire to participate in the denial of a person's rights. The victim's well-being is overlooked as they are diminished to an object to be exploited for the agent's sexual gratification. The agent desires to engage in this activity and does so willingly, realizing their intentions through their avatar. Virtual rape is an actualization of the desire to rape. After all, an avatar cannot perpetuate a virtual rape unless its corresponding agent intends for it do so. Although the agent does not harm

someone physically, they endorse their desire to participate in dehumanization and do so in an environment where they will suffer no consequences. To hold virtual rapists accountable is to condemn not only the intention to dehumanize but also the willingness to engage in such behavior.

#### 4.1.1 Intentionality in Three Cases

When we typically think of physical rape, we think of who has been harmed by experiencing sexual violence. Rape occurs to someone who has had their rights and body violated. Previous arguments have attempted to find the wrongs of virtual rape or virtual pedophilia by identifying victims of harm. They have done so by linking virtual acts to physical consequences before arguing that virtual acts are morally wrong as they harm people who are already marginalized. Virtual acts then reinforce preexisting wrongs but are not inherently wrong. I have argued that harm is not necessary to discovering the wrongs of virtual rape by focusing on the intention of the agent who wants to perpetuate virtual rape. However, two faults seem to appear with this focus. The first objection addresses dehumanization. To reduce someone to a tool for pleasure is to harm them. Can harm be removed from dehumanization? Secondly, the agent dehumanizes a representation of an individual or an NPC. As a result, no person is dehumanized or exploited. Is this truly dehumanization or is there an unidentified wrong in virtual rape? I will explore three cases: Wilson – Valdez, rape fantasies, and rape pornography; I will first emphasize the importance of intentionality in finding the wrong of virtual rape and then answer these objections.

#### 4.1.2 Three Cases

Our first case is the rape of Elizabeth Xan Wilson who was raped at knifepoint by Joel Rene Valdez. Valdez entered Wilson's apartment without permission and coerced her into sexual relations by utilizing a deadly weapon. Wilson requested that Valdez use a condom which a Texas jury understood to be a verbalization of consent. The jury concluded that because she did not communicate a lack of consent, she had consented to engage in sexual relations with Valdez.

Our second case involves Molly and Katy who both desire to engage in a rape fantasy. They create an identical storyline to the Wilson – Valdez case. Molly will enter Katy's apartment, coerce her with a knife, and rape her. The scenario will end if either Molly or Katy use their designated safe word. Our third case is the creation of a pornographic film starring Henry and Jessica. Like Molly and Katy's fantasy, the pornographic film has an identical storyline to the Wilson – Valdez case. Henry and Jessica freely agree to create this film and designate a safeword.

Although the actions appear identical, it seems that Valdez is the outlier. The obvious distinction between Molly, Henry, and Valdez is the state of mind of those engaged in sexual relations. Katy and Jessica were consenting whereas Wilson was not but we have yet to accomplish anything meaningful regarding better understanding rape in virtual reality. I believe that our focus on the victims forces us to overlook the intentions of Valdez, Molly, and Henry. It is clear that Valdez intended to rape Wilson. Molly and Henry did not intend to rape Katy and Jessica. Unlike Valdez, they did not value their sexual satisfaction at the expense of someone else's bodily autonomy and integrity. We have established that

Molly and Henry did not have the same intentions as Valdez, but their characters did. Should we hold Molly, Henry, and Valdez equally accountable?

#### 4.1.3 The Relationship Between Agent and Avatar

One could argue that the actions of the avatar are not an accurate representation of the agent. After all, when an actor plays a murderer on television, they play a character who is not a reflection of themselves. Firstly, the actor is bound by a script whereas the agent is not but what is more important, and relevant, is the connection between agent and character. How does the relationship between virtual avatar and agent differ from the actor and the murderer character? I previously argued that the integration of the virtual and physical body hints at a type of agency that empowers the agent to realize their desires. However, the integration of physical bodies does not always indicate an integration of desires. However, doesn't it seem strange to say that the agent's desires can or should be integrated with the desires of the avatar? The avatar has no mind, no desires, and no fears. It does not exist unless it is created. It does not move unless it is willed to do so by the agent. In other words, it only "lives" when the agent wills it to do so. This complete dependence reminds us that an agent's intentions are translated into and through the avatar. After all, the agent must realize their intention to have an avatar and must realize their intention to have the avatar interact with virtual reality. It is the agent that chooses to engage in virtual rape, virtual murder, or virtual charity through the avatar. The avatar is a vehicle for the agent who lives out the full extent of their desires in the virtual landscape.

However, the cases of Molly, Katy, Henry, and Jessica can be interpreted to support the opposite claim. When an agent engages in rape pornography or a rape fantasy, they do

not intend to rape but are rather playing a character who has that intention. There seemed to be a clear barrier between Molly and Henry and the characters that they played. Consent seems to have made engaging in those representations of rape morally permissible. Furthermore, Molly and Henry ensured that their “victims” consented to participate in an engagement of rape. They did not intend to diminish Katy or Jessica to objects or exploit them for pleasure. Molly and Henry, however, differ in that Molly does derive pleasure from engaging in rape fantasies. She finds the experience of engaging in rape, and subsequently dehumanization, to be enjoyable. Despite her fantasies, she does not actualize her intentions in the way that Valdez did. She sought consent – but is that enough to render this intention morally permissible?

Unlike Valdez, Molly does not actualize her desires through physical rape because she does not intend to harm another being. It seems unreasonable to hold someone accountable for every morally suspect thought or desire they may experience. Molly demonstrates self-restraint. She seeks out consent because she understands that acting upon every desire can lead to harm. She prioritizes Katy’s well-being over her sexual needs, as demonstrated by the use of the safe word. We cannot hold Valdez and Molly equally accountable for the wrongs of virtual rape as their intentions, and the way they realize their intentions, differ.

## 4.2 SOLVING THE GAMER’S DILEMMA

Patridge and Bartel have provided solutions to the gamer’s dilemma with arguments that are based upon harm. However, I have challenged the connection between harm and committing real wrong, arguing that the wrong of virtual rape is the

actualization of the intention to reduce another human being to a tool for pleasure.

Intending to participate in such an action reflects not only willingness but enjoyment. I argue that the intentionality of virtual murder and virtual rape do not differ as virtual murder also results in dehumanization.

When we murder a character in virtual reality, we do so for pleasure. The agent seeks satisfaction from their ability to murder, whether that be from the skill required to shoot a virtual gun or control their virtual body to strangle or beat their victim. The agent intends to murder, and they actualize that intention by utilizing violence against another character. The prevalence of murder-based games may make this claim appear harsh, but, as Morgan Luck argued, socialization does not always align with morality. In both virtual murder and virtual rape, the victim becomes not only an object but also a virtual toy to be exploited as the agent sees fit. To desire to engage in such behavior, to intend to do so, and to pursue these actions in an environment without repercussions is morally reprehensible.

## 5 CONCLUSION

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Through this thesis, I sought to 1) explain what constitutes as virtual rape; 2) identify moral differences between rape in VR and PR, focusing on consent and representations of rape; 3) challenge the idea that virtual wrongs must be based upon PR harm; and 4) argue that virtual rape is morally wrong because it is the realization of an agent's intentions to dehumanize other peoples. Finally, I found no relevant moral distinction between virtual rape and virtual murder as both results in dehumanization.

Firstly, all sexual engagements in virtual reality are not rape and should not be considered rape. NPCs cannot consent but what is important is that the agent intends to engage in virtual rape. Secondly, as our analogous cases of rape pornography and rape fantasies showed, intention is important when one chooses to engage in representations of rape. Unlike Valdez, Molly and Henry do not intend to utilize their partners as sexual objects. The well-being of their partners is prioritized regardless of if they contradict with Molly and Henry's desires. Valdez, however, intends to dehumanize Wilson for the sake of his desires and realizes those intentions in a way that is morally reprehensible. The agent who engages in virtual rape, although they do not harm another human being, has similar intentions to Valdez. The agent realizes those intentions in an empowered setting and the actualization of those intentions should be seen as morally reprehensible. Finally, I find Patridge and Bartel's arguments unsatisfying because of their reliance upon harm to find virtual crimes wrong. According to Patridge and Bartel, acts such as virtual pedophilia and virtual rape are wrong because they perpetuate harm against those who are already oppressed in PR. The need to connect harm and wrongs in VR is misleading. Regardless

of who is harmed, realizing one's intentions to engage in dehumanization, whether that is through virtual rape or virtual murder, is wrong. Intentionality matters, especially in VR when an agent is not limited by the consequences they may face in PR. As agents are most empowered in VR, their actions are most indicative of their desires and intentions. Thus, they must be held morally accountable for the intentions that lead them to commit acts such as rape or murder in VR.

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