

## Players, Characters, and the Gamer's Dilemma

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### Abstract

Is there any difference between playing videogames in which the player's character commits murder and videogames in which the player's character commits paedophilic acts? Morgan Luck's 'Gamer's Dilemma' has established this question as a puzzle concerning notions of permissibility and harm. We propose that a fruitful alternative way to approach the question is through an account of aesthetic engagement. We develop an alternative to the dominant account of the relationship between players and the actions of their characters, and argue that the ethical difference between so-called 'virtual murder' and 'virtual paedophilia' is to be understood in terms of the fiction-making resources available to players. We propose that the relevant considerations for potential players to navigate concern: (1) attempting to make certain characters intelligible, and (2) using aspects of oneself as resources for homomorphic representation.

### 1. The Gamer's Dilemma

Morgan Luck's (2009) 'Gamer's Dilemma' consists of the following claims:

- (1) Playing a videogame in such a way that one commits an act of virtual murder is permissible because no real harm occurs
- (2) No real harm occurs when playing a videogame in such a way that one commits an act of virtual paedophilia
- (3) Playing a videogame in such a way that one commits an act of virtual paedophilia is not permissible

Luck defines what it is to 'commit virtual murder' or 'commit virtual paedophilia' as follows: 'A player commits an act of virtual murder in those cases where he directs his character to kill another in circumstances such that, were the game environment actual, the actions of his character would constitute actual murder' (31), and 'A player commits an act of virtual paedophilia in those cases where she directs her character to molest another in circumstances such [that], were the game environment actual, her character would be deemed a paedophile' (32).

The 'Gamer's Dilemma' concerns which of the three claims should be rejected. Luck takes (1) and (3) to be held relatively widely in pre-theoretical engagement with videogames and, on the surface, relatively plausible. But somebody who holds (1) would also be under some pressure to accept (2), since the intuition that no real harm occurs in cases of virtual murder in videogames is likely to rest on the intuition that *nothing* that happens in the game is 'real', in which case it also (apparently) frees acts of virtual paedophilia in videogames from causing 'real harm'.

Luck sees the dilemma as a challenge to any gamer who will commit virtual murder (VM) but has a moral objection to committing virtual paedophilia (VP). This person must either provide an argument that the one act is permissible and the other impermissible, or give up playing violent videogames, unless they are 'prepared to bite [the] bullet' (32) of deeming VP

permissible. Luck's position is that no persuasive distinction between VM and VP is forthcoming, and so the gamer is forced to revise their judgement of one case or the other.

We shall argue that a fruitful way to approach the dilemma is by starting with how it relates to questions in aesthetics, since the specific aesthetic considerations we shall raise help to illuminate what, precisely, we are to evaluate when considering the ethics of playing.<sup>i</sup> The first question to tackle is the relationship between the player and the fictional truths involved in playing the game. Although Luck gives a definition of what it is for a player to 'commit' a virtual act, we cannot know what this amounts to until we know what it is for a player to 'direct a character', which requires understanding the relationship between the player and the character's actions.

A pervasive assumption in debates about VP and VM is that the acts of a character can in some way be attributed to the player. Rami Ali (2015) writes: 'a virtual act is an act which a gamer performs, using her in-game character, on a ... character in the game's virtual world' (267). Christopher Bartel attributes fictional acts to the player when he describes an hypothetical player as 'committing an act of paedophilia in a video game' (2012: 11), and when he writes, 'I have committed numerous violent acts in video-game worlds' and refers to these as 'my actions' (2015: 285). Garry Young writes that '*Postal 2* allows me to set someone on fire while they are alive, douse the flames by urinating on them, before beating them to death with my boot and a shovel' (2016: 2). Stephanie Patridge says that in many games 'it is we who enact the wrong represented' (2011: 306).<sup>ii</sup>

Such views envisage an intimate relationship between player and character, in which fictional actions can be attributed to the player's agency as if the player were the agent of *those* actions. No argument for this view is offered in the papers in question, but one might hope to provide one by looking to accounts such as Grant Tavinor's (2009) and Jon Robson and Aaron Meskin's (2016), both of which utilise Kendall Walton's (1990) theory of fiction. Although there is dispute between Tavinor and Robson and Meskin over how to implement Walton's notions (particularly his distinction between 'game worlds' and 'work worlds'), what matters for our purposes is the claim they have in common: that gameplay generates fictional truths about the player.

In the next section, we shall focus on the most recent variant of this approach, Robson and Meskin's (2016) account of 'self-involving interactive fictions' (but the proposal we develop is also a challenge to Tavinor's view that playing generates fictional truths about the player). Robson and Meskin's view does not try to deal with the gamer's dilemma, but in proposing an alternative approach to the relationship between the player and the actions of their character, we will introduce the resources which, we argue, are best placed to do this.

## 2. Interaction and Fictional Truth

Robson and Meskin (2016) argue that some videogames are 'self-involving interactive fictions', meaning that the player's interaction with the game generates fictional truths about the player. Thus, first-person statements that a player might make, such as 'I shot him', are to be taken as reports of the fictional truths. On Robson and Meskin's account, a playing of the game is a fiction in which there are fictional truths about the player (167-8). When a player makes decisions about what 'her player character (or avatar)' will do, 'these decisions not only make certain things fictional concerning her avatar but also – given that her avatar is fictionally her – make many of the same things fictionally true about her' (168).

Whilst we agree that players' interactions with a game have a distinctive role in generating fictional truths, we do not think they generate fictional truths *about players' actions* (nor do we think it is fictional that there is an identity between the player and the character). By identifying significant features of *how* fictional truths are generated by playings, we can account for why there may be an impulse to take the fiction to include fictional truths about the player, but also show why such a claim does not in fact follow from the distinctive way in which these particular interactive fictions are composed.

Engagement with the fictions in question involves, we suggest, taking up a form of authorial role.<sup>iii</sup> Two ways in which this is distinguished from a traditional authorial role are pertinent here. First, as in many other interactive fictions (whether videogames or not), the person engaging takes on aspects of the role which is traditionally the author's, and aspects of the role which is traditionally the audience's. They play a role in determining the content of the fiction (as an 'author') for their own appreciation (as an 'audience'). Second, the player's authorial control is distributed in a particular way: the aspects of the fiction which the player contributes to authoring are those concerning a particular character. We shall express this by saying that the player's authorial role is 'channelled' through that character.<sup>iv</sup>

Robson and Meskin argue that their view makes the best sense of discourse about fictional events which involves the player. They argue that it is preferable to take this discourse as stating fictional truths about the player, rather than attempting to treat it as 'merely a shorthand for certain "real world" claims concerning the player and his or her interactions with the game'; for instance, taking 'Bill beat Galactus' as a paraphrase of 'Bill cleared the final boss of *Marvel vs. Capcom 3*' (169). Acknowledging the authorial aspect of the player's role, however, reveals that a better type of paraphrase is available. We suggest that a claim like '[The player] beat Galactus' should be taken as paraphrastic for 'x beat Galactus', where 'x' is used to pick out a particular character as the one through which the player's authorial influence is channelled. The first-person 'I' can be understood as 'my character', the fictional person whose acts the player is in a position to author (when the interactive structure of the game allows).

This also provides us with a response to Robson and Meskin's argument that treating first-person claims as paraphrastic for claims about actual events concerning the composition of the game or the fiction fails to respect the fact that first-person claims are readily made by players when they are 'deeply involved in the narrative of the game' (170). They write: 'consider, for comparison, the difficulty of remaining emotionally involved in the plot of a movie while heavily focused on the technical details of the cinematography' (170). But note, first, that Robson and Meskin here understand the player by comparison with a traditional viewer. Whilst it is not, to our mind, obvious that there is a tension between being emotionally involved in a fiction and attending to technical aspects of its construction even from a traditional viewer's position, it is even less obvious in the case of somebody occupying a hybrid position with aspects of both authorial and audience engagement. After all, it is to be expected that authorship involves an harmonious relationship between attention to what fictionally happens and attention to the fact that certain actual-world features serve to make certain things fictional. But, in any case, and more importantly, the type of paraphrase we have suggested bypasses the objection, because it does not treat player-involving discourse as making reference to particular features of how the fiction is constructed, beyond the fact that the player's authorial influence is channelled through a particular character.

Taking playing to involve aspects of both authorial and audience roles is consonant with taking players' agency to have a special role in generating fictional truths in videogame

playings. Many fictions are constructed in such a way that the person engaging can get information about the fictional world not just from what is (for example) on screen, but also from the experiences they themselves have whilst engaging. We suggest that in the case of videogame fictions, agential aspects of the player are often used to represent agential aspects of the character. For example, a player's deliberating over what to represent may function as a representation of the character deliberating over what to do. This sort of representation is *homomorphic* (like represents like), because the character's deliberation is represented by an instance of deliberation – namely, the player's. This sort of representation is also *demonstrative*, because the audience (the player) identifies what is fictional by imagining that things for the character are *like this* (where 'this' is the experience they themselves are undergoing).<sup>v</sup> Clearly, what the player should imagine in such cases is not simply 'The character's experience is *entirely* like this'. But they should imagine that the character's experience is like the player's own experience *along some dimension of experience*, e.g. the dimension that makes both the character's act and the player's act choices, or both cases of deliberation, delay, uncertainty, decisiveness, recklessness.

When the player's choices are co-opted into the representation in this way, choice (on the player's part) represents choice (on the character's part). It is not fictional that the character chooses what the player chooses, because the player chooses to *represent* something being done and the character chooses to *do* something. Neither is it fictional that the player chooses what the character chooses. Rather, the relationship is that the player performing an act of choosing represents the character performing an act of choosing.

This relationship may be enough to create an *impression* that the player fictionally acts, or that there is a fictional identity between player and character. Because the representation is demonstrative, there is an element of the player 'pointing towards' themselves in grasping what is fictional. The fact that the fiction is 'self-involving' in *this* sense might give the impression that it is self-involving in another sense, that what the player 'points towards' in themselves is *itself* represented by the fictional truths, when in fact it serves only to generate them.

In articulating an alternative to Robson and Meskin's view of the relationship between the player and the character, we have introduced the elements which we think are required to understand VP and VM. On our account, the focus should be not on what is fictionally true of the player, but rather on the kinds of representational contributions the player is able to make – that is, on what fiction-making resources are available to players of videogames.<sup>vi</sup> We shall now flesh out this approach by saying more about the fiction-making resources that playing makes available.

### **3. Reconstruing VM and VP by Characterising Playing as an Issue About Fiction-making Resources**

It follows from our account that for the player to 'commit virtual murder' or 'commit virtual paedophilia' is not for it to be fictional that the player commits any such act (or, indeed, any act at all). So, for example, although Ali (2015) says that 'most gamers regularly commit acts of virtual murder (which are virtual acts that would have counted as murder had the virtual environment in which they were performed been real)' (267), we should resist identifying the player's act with any of the acts which would be murder were the game environment actual. The player's act of, say, pressing a button would not have counted as murder regardless of what environment had been actual. Had the game environment been actual, the act of the

character would have been murder, but no act of the player's would have been murder, since it is not fictionally true that the player is the one who performs the murder.

We shall retain the terms VM ('virtual murder') and VP ('virtual paedophilia'). On our view, however, for 'virtual murder' to take place is for a fictional murder to take place, committed by the player's character, authored by the player's deployment of fiction-making resources as made available by the interactive structure of the game. And similarly for 'virtual paedophilia'. Thus, it is misleading (at best) to describe the player as 'committing' VP and VM.

On this view, there is a sense in which the 'gamer's dilemma' is not really a *gamer's* dilemma at all, but a dilemma concerning the choice to have certain fictional truths represented, something which arises in the case of games but also in the case of other fictions. This places the gamer's dilemma as a version of a general puzzle which could also be framed in terms of the choice to author a representation of paedophilic as opposed to murderous acts in a work of, say, film or literature, or in terms of the choice to engage as an audience-member with one work but not the other. To agree with this proposal is not, however, to deny that there is some ethical significance particular to playing. Rather, the proposal reveals that the ethical significance lies in how the interactive structure of the game *modifies* what resources are available for fiction-making.

There are two ways this happens. First, the player's fiction-making resources are *restricted* (in comparison to a case of traditional authorship) because they are channelled through a particular character: the player's fiction-making resources focus only on specific aspects of the fictional world. Second, the player's fiction-making resources are also *expanded*, because they can utilise their own psychological states to represent aspects of the character homomorphically.

Both these things are also found, to an extent, in cases either of traditional authorship or of traditional audience engagement. In the first case, a person's influence over what is fictional can often be restricted to a particular aspect of a fictional world. Not only does this happen in other cases of interactive fiction which are not videogames, we can also expect it to characterise traditional authorship at specific points in the authorial process. Channelling of influence over what is fictional through a particular character, for example, would happen during any episode where an author takes other fictional truths for granted and focuses on how a given character will behave in a given situation. In the second case, traditional cases of film-viewing can involve audiences using aspects of their own engagement to homomorphically represent facts about characters.<sup>vii</sup>

In involving a greater amount of channelling, and of homomorphic representation involving the player's own experiences of the game, playing differs in degree, but not in kind, from other types of fiction-making. However, one might think that homomorphic representation of *choice*, which we have argued (in Section 2) is a feature of engagement with videogames, is not found in traditional forms of engagement with fiction. Whether or not this does turn out to be unique to playing will not matter to our argument. The point we wish to make is that the homomorphic representation of choice derives not from something *sui generis* about playing, but can be explained *wholly* by the way that playing combines elements of traditional authorship and traditional audience engagement. Authors make choices about what a fiction will represent and how. Normally, these choices would not function as homomorphic representations because they are not something the author makes available to the audience in order for the audience to ascertain what happens in the fictional world. The audience can be invited to use their *own* experiences of engaging to homomorphically represent, but since they do not have access to the author's experiences, experiences which are specifically

authorial (e.g. choosing what will be fictional) are not normally resources for homomorphic representation.

This is not to deny that traditional authors can also be audiences to their fictions. Typically, however, an author does not take what is distinctive of their authorial position to characterise what is typical of the audience position. Many interactive fictions, though, do allow players to assume, as authors of whatever elements of the fiction they are enabled to author, that what is typical for the audience is that they are invited to use such authorial experiences for homomorphic representation.

Given this characterisation of what is distinctive of playing as fiction-making, we can now articulate what issues are pertinent to representing immoral content in videogame play, and, in particular, what differences there might be between playing VP and VM games. We propose that the relevant considerations for potential players to navigate concern, first, attempting to make certain characters intelligible (sections 4 and 5) and, second, which aspects of oneself are to be used as resources for homomorphic representation (section 6). The first of these draws on what we have said so far about the player's authorial role, and the second will draw on the idea of homomorphic representation of agency. These two distinct aesthetic considerations concerning gameplay both impact, we shall argue, on the ethical significance of VM and VP.

#### 4. Intelligibility of Characters' Choices

Tavinor (2017) writes: 'Character motivations have always been a crucial aspect of stories, and understanding narrative works is usually if not always partly a case of understanding the motivations of the characters' (24). Tavinor argues that this applies to players' characters in videogames. His discussion concerns cases where the game gives the impression of a 'hidden' motivation for a character and invites the player to deliberate about what, specifically, this motivation could be. We would like to focus instead on a more general feature of engagement with fictional characters: that it typically involves viewing a character as intelligible, that is, as having *something* we would recognise as a reason for their actions. Characters can be found intelligible even when there is no interpretative call to deliberate the specifics of their motivations.

One of the typical objectives of fiction-making is to represent characters behaving in such a way that they are intelligible: that the audience can recognise them as acting for reasons. In general, then, one task the player can take on in making choices about what to represent is to represent behaviour which allows the audience (notably, the player themselves) to take the character as having motivations which are recognisable as reasons for acting.<sup>viii</sup>

Some games have ludic objectives which are such that meeting these objectives will automatically lead to representing the character as intelligible. For instance, in a racing game, the ludic objective is to be the quickest to make one's character cover the course. In achieving this, you represent your character as being the quickest to cover the course. The behaviour the character is represented as having when a player tries to meet the ludic objective is behaviour we can recognise as being motivated by the character's wanting to win the race; thus, characters' actions are made intelligible. But meeting a ludic objective is not, in all games, sufficient to represent characters as acting intelligibly. Although meeting ludic objectives will always make the *player* intelligible (along the dimension of wanting to get more points), it does not necessarily make the *character* intelligible. Indeed, meeting ludic objectives may tend to make the character *less* intelligible (if the way to score points is to

represent characters as doing something we would not recognise as having any purpose or meaning, such as eating coins).

What matters for the case of VM and VP is that some representations of violence and abuse disrupt the intelligibility of a character less than others. Rage, fear, frustration, greed and revenge, which are the sorts of motivations that can be assumed in many of the cases of murder represented in videogames, are more readily regarded as intelligible reasons for action than paedophilic sexual desire. Being *motivated by sexual desire* is certainly intelligible, but a typical experience of sexual desire makes it hard to see how that desire could be a *response to a child*.

The kind of intelligibility we are interested in here relates to what Kathleen Stock (2006) calls *substantive* as opposed to merely *formal* intelligibility.<sup>ix</sup> Formal intelligibility has to do with situating an act or attitude within a wider network of the character's psychological states, whereas 'to make a given fictional action *substantively* intelligible is not simply to cite certain mental states which cohere with it, but also to show that the mental states with which it coheres are *themselves* ... intelligible' (55).

For instance, Humbert's kidnap and drugging of a child in Nabokov's *Lolita* is made formally intelligible by seeing that it is a means of fulfilling a desire that Humbert has: 'by showing how those actions cohere with [Humbert's] desire to seduce the child, and with his belief that kidnapping and drugging her is a means of doing so' (54). Of more interest, though, Stock argues, is that Humbert's desire 'is made substantively intelligible for the reader when the desire is related, either directly or indirectly, to some desirability characterization: perhaps, a desire to regain feelings of one's sexual awakening; or a desire for sexual possession of a person with at least some of Lolita's physical characteristics (her "glowing" skin, "the silky shimmer of her temples shading into bright, brown, hair" (Nabokov 1995: 41) ...)' (56).

On this view, making Humbert's acts substantively intelligible involves characterizing their aims in such a way that the characterization describes something which can be recognised by the reader as desirable. Stock notes that *Lolita* 'alternately invites and evades such interpretations' (56) of how Humbert is motivated. But there is a further complexity which we would like to draw attention to. *Even when* Humbert's motivations are characterised in this way, we suggest, their intelligibility can be disrupted by attending to the fact that the object which figures in the aim so characterised is a child. This is because, we suggest, in addition to the kind of (un)intelligibility which involves whether we can impose a recognisable desirability characterization on a character's behaviour, there is a different kind of (un)intelligibility involving which types of attitudes can take which types of objects.

This kind of (un)intelligibility rests on how the reader's (or, in the case of games, the player's) own experiences of particular attitudes present the attitude as something that can be manifested in some ways and not in others. We suggest that this is the best way to understand another of Stock's examples: 'the *prima facie* unintelligibility of a wife-beater's account of his activities, who claims that he acts thus "because he loves her"' (65). Someone's own experience of love most likely presents that attitude to them as something that could not be manifested by beating someone. Similarly, someone's own experience of sexual desire likely presents that desire to them as something that could not be a response to a child.

To highlight this further form of substantive intelligibility which paedophilic characters are likely to lack is not to deny that they can *also* lack substantive intelligibility of the kind Stock identifies. The fact that Humbert's acts can be placed under a recognisable desirability characterization is an artistic achievement of *Lolita* precisely because it is *hard* to place

paedophilic choices under a desirability characterization. In some fictions, paedophilic choices will be unintelligible in more than one way.

What this discussion shows about VP games is not simply that since it is particularly hard to find a paedophilic character's choices intelligible, it is also hard to sustain a paedophilic character as a focus of the fiction. Rather, of more significance for the gamer's dilemma, we propose, is that one might *want* not to find paedophilia intelligible. A person may regard it as an important part of their own ethical (and sexual) identity that they are not somebody who finds paedophilic desire intelligible. In that case, their view of themselves is properly manifested by not doing the things that would require that paedophilia be intelligible. Making paedophilic choices a focus, as a player would by playing a game in which their authorial role is channelled through a paedophilic character, often does require this. So this person has a reason – and a reason that stems from what they want their ethical stance on paedophilia to be – not to play VP games.<sup>x</sup>

Our account also explains why there is, intuitively, a difference between playing a game where the player's fiction-making influence is channelled through a character who engages in paedophilic acts, and one where it is channelled through a police officer who is pursuing such a character. No difficulties attend making the police officer's reasons intelligible. Moreover, if the focus is on the police officer, the fiction becomes one about somebody tracking something down, and the player does not have to engage with the question of whether whatever is being tracked down is an intelligible person or not.

Understanding the difference between VM and VP in terms of intelligibility does not mean we should conclude that *all* VP games will be problematic for the player in a way *no* VM game will ever be. Sometimes part of the point of a fiction is precisely that it makes us *reflect* on the intelligibility or unintelligibility of particular fictional acts. This is part of the reward of engaging with *Lolita*, for example. It seems it could also be rewarding to make it fictional that a character performs a paedophilic act in a game which is designed so as to make us actively reflect on what is (un)intelligible to us and on what we want to be (un)intelligible to us. That a game (or other kind of work) offers such rewards would be a reason to engage with it (which does not, of course, mean that there couldn't also be reasons against engaging).<sup>xi</sup>

Equally, it may be that some cases of VM would involve representing behaviour such that it is part of the player's ethical orientation on the world that they want to find such behaviour unintelligible. For instance, it may be important to the player that they are somebody who is not capable of taking 'I didn't like his face' as a reason someone might have for murdering somebody else. In that case, the player has a reason not to play a VM game where they represent killings being done on this basis.<sup>xii</sup> As for the case of VP, a VM game which encourages reflection on the player's own attitudes concerning what is intelligible to them might be rewarding to play partly for that reason.<sup>xiii</sup>

Indeed, the point generalises beyond VM and VP. There are various actions a person may not want to find intelligible. Games involving other forms of sexual assault, violence, or immoral instances of discrimination may require the player to adopt a view about reasons which is in tension with what they want to find (un)intelligible. For example, authoring a particular representation of rape may involve treating hatred as an intelligible motivation for a sexual act, and authoring particular representations of discriminatory acts may involve treating racist motivations as intelligible. Whether one has reasons to play (or to avoid playing) depends on what one wants to find unintelligible, but also on the game. As for the cases of VM and VP, a game which encourages reflection on the player's own attitudes

concerning what is intelligible to them can offer rewards that are not offered by a game which encourages no such reflection.

## 5. Storytelling and Simulation

Our proposal concerning intelligibility allows us to improve on Ali's (2015) diagnosis of the ethical significance of VM and VP. Ali's response to the gamer's dilemma involves arguing that the narratives of VM games often provide reasons for characters acting as they do, such as 'winning the war, defending oneself, getting one's own way, or revenge' (273), whereas it is easy to envisage games involving VP as involving an absence of such reasons for the character's actions. Whilst sympathetic to Ali's focus on whether players understand characters' motivations, we think Ali's diagnosis of the ethical significance of VM and VP is inadequate.

Ali argues that our diverging judgements of VM and VP arise because we take VM games to be *storytelling* games, which 'provide a narrative' (271), whereas we are inclined to conceive of VP games as *simulation* games, in which play focuses on 'enjoying or exercising a virtual freedom in a given domain' which 'simulate[s] our natural freedom' (270). Ali then argues that since 'simulation games do not provide their own narrative' but 'simply allow the gamer's context to define the in-game context', VM and VP would both reflect on players in a particular way: 'when a gamer enacts murder or pedophilia in these games, the act is one of virtual murder or virtual pedophilia because the gamer defines it in this way. As such, the act here reflects the sorts of act the gamer finds desirable' (273).

Thus, Ali's position is that where an action is immoral, there is also a moral problem with choosing to represent it in playing a simulation game, whereas storytelling games exculpate the player because the narrative calls for them to represent the immoral actions taking place. But, we shall argue, this attempt to diagnose the issue in terms of a general distinction between storytelling and simulation fails.

To illustrate his point about storytelling games, Ali imagines a version of the *God of War* games in which 'Kratos, by way of cruelly punishing (as is typical of Kratos) a human colluding with the Olympians, takes his young son or daughter and molests the child. ... If the gamer performs the act by way of appropriately engaging the narrative [sic], it is unclear why that act should be singled out as questionable.' (272) But Ali misdiagnoses what this example shows. A significant feature of the Kratos scenario is that by understanding Kratos's motivation as *punishment*, we entirely bypass the need to attempt to understand how an act could proceed from *sexual desire* directed on children. As such, the case does not show that a storytelling game would make VP *qua* VP unproblematic. What it shows, we suggest, is that the provision of alternative motivations can remove any need to consider whether paedophilic desire can count as an intelligible motivation.

In the case of simulation games, Ali does not provide a supporting framework to determine what precisely would be problematic about the way in which the gamer determines the fictional truths about the character, such that VM or VP would show the gamer in a bad light by '[reflecting] the sorts of act the gamer finds desirable'. The phrase 'gamer finds desirable' is ambiguous. It could mean that the gamer desires to *represent* acts of murder or paedophilia taking place. On this reading, it is true that the choice to represent such acts reflects the desire, but Ali's account gives no explanation of why this would reflect badly on the player. Or it could mean that the gamer desires to 'enact' VM or VP in the sense of making it part of the content of the fiction that they are an agent who performs murderous or paedophilic acts. This requires a particular view of the relationship between player and

fiction, which we rejected in section 2.<sup>xiv</sup> Alternatively, what Ali's claim might mean is that the gamer finds something desirable about *actual* murder or *actual* paedophilia, and their choice to represent something is an indication of what they would like to do. But this is a speculative generalisation about gameplay, for which Ali's account does not supply an argument.

## 6. Homomorphic Representation of Motivation

Ali would not be alone, however, in making this speculative suggestion. Luck writes that 'Intuitively, it does seem likely that people who are interested in committing acts of virtual paedophilia do so because they believe there is something enjoyable about actual paedophilia' (2009: 34), and Patridge says that 'It is exceedingly difficult to imagine an agent that enjoys virtual pedophilia but does not have unseemly sexual urges toward children, however weak' (2011: 306). Our own account provides resources which, as we shall now show, make more secure sense of how VP might be taken to reflect back in some way on the player's own desires, by grounding this thought not in speculation, but in a philosophical argument about the nature of representation and engagement.

We have argued that some psychological features of a player, notably choice, can function to homomorphically represent some aspects of the character. Clearly, not every state the player is undergoing will function as a homomorphic representation. But there is an open question over *which* other states of the player might be supposed to serve as homomorphic representational contributions; or, putting it another way, what aspects of a character's agency and experiences a player might be invited to homomorphically represent in order to fully engage with a game.<sup>xv</sup> In particular, homomorphic representation of *motivation* would understandably be of concern for players considering engaging in games involving VP. This is exacerbated by the precedent set by many VM games. In games involving, e.g., gunfighting, several of the responses a player might have are apt as homomorphic representations of characters' states – for instance, excitement, panic at the pace of play, and acting without reflection. If players expect a VP game to similarly trade on representational resources from the player, then they might expect that playing the game involves providing something to homomorphically represent paedophilic motivations.<sup>xvi</sup>

In the VM game, the responses which can homomorphically represent many aspects of character motivation come simply from engaging in gameplay. In the VP case, it is not clear how gameplay itself would offer the responses which could play a role in homomorphic representation of motivation, such as sexual arousal or desire. One cause for concern on the player's part might be their very uncertainty over what the sources of these responses would have to be – for example, whether homomorphic representation would require them to be aroused by representations of sexual acts involving children.<sup>xvii</sup> Another might be that even if the representations themselves are not a source of sexual arousal or desire, the player would be worried to find themselves capable of experiencing arousal from *any* source in a context where they are thinking about paedophilia, as they believe the thought of paedophilia should be so repulsive as to make arousal impossible.

This is enough to make the possibility of an invitation to homomorphically represent a paedophilic character's motivation more problematic than an invitation to homomorphically represent a murderous character's motivation would typically be. Once concerns about VP's connection to actual desire are substantiated in this subtler way – rather than left as an assertion that players desire the types of immoral acts they choose for their characters to fictionally perform – it is also clear that, *contra* Ali, they are independent of the distinction between storytelling and simulation.<sup>xviii</sup>

## 7. Conclusion

Our account recasts the gamer's dilemma in terms of what is characteristic of playing as a way of contributing to generating fictional truths. By resisting (in section 2) the view that playing makes things fictionally true of the player, and providing an alternative account of the relationship between the player and the character, we see that the ethical significance of VM and VP can be understood in terms of the player's deployment of fiction-making resources (section 3). When understood in these terms, the questions that we propose are relevant for the gamer are (in sections 4 and 5) whether they want to put themselves in the position of someone who is open to making certain choices intelligible, and (in section 6) when they are able and willing to use aspects of themselves as representational resources.<sup>xix</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> We set aside the question of whether and when VP and VM should be legislated against (see Young (2016)). We also set aside the sociological reasons that there may be to abstain from playing VP games. The player may be worried about what others would think of them, and this may well be reason enough to not play VP games. Our focus here is whether there are reasons stemming from considerations in aesthetics about what engagement with videogames requires. Finally, we set aside the question of whether playing has morally weighty *consequences* – e.g., whether playing certain games would lead to an increase (or decrease) of actual murder or actual paedophilia – and the question of whether and when playing would count as cultivating vices (or even virtues). Clearly, these would be reasons relevant to whether to play or not. Our arguments may have some bearing on these issues – for instance, depending on one's ideas of virtue and vice, the features we identify may help to clarify what virtue and vice in gameplaying may look like. Our aim here is not to explore these connections, although the spirit of the paper is to suggest that the ethical considerations about gameplay cannot be resolved in isolation from aesthetic considerations.

<sup>ii</sup> In what follows, we seek to undermine this assumption and to show that a new response to the gamer's dilemma arises from offering an alternative to this view of the relationship between the player and the character's actions. We do not seek to undermine all the responses to the gamer's dilemma put forward by these writers, some of which we believe can be made compatible with reconstruing the relationship between player and character in the way we do.

<sup>iii</sup> This does not entail that the player takes up a *narratorial* role. We leave open whether Andrew Kania (2018) is correct that players fail to qualify as telling a story in the way required of a narrator.

<sup>iv</sup> All that matters for our arguments here is that players make an authorial contribution to the fictions associated with *playings*, even if, as Berys Gaut (2010: 144-151) argues, they cannot be considered co-authors of the 'work' itself. Note, too, that what we are here calling 'channelling' is compatible with the author creating fictional truths about the character from either the first-person or the third-person perspective.

<sup>v</sup> See Gregory Currie (e.g. 2010) for a characterisation of demonstrative, homomorphic representation of experience.

<sup>vi</sup> Whilst Robson and Meskin hold that it is fictional that the player commits an act, David Velleman (2007) argues that in certain cases, players actually commit fictional acts. Although we do not discuss

this proposal, we hold that whatever the scope of 'fictional', the same mechanisms – the player's authorial role, and the homomorphic representation of agency – give rise to the impression of the player as the agent of fictional actions.

<sup>vii</sup> Currie (2010) argues that audiences use their visual experiences as homomorphic representations of characters' experiences in hallucination scenes, and we have argued that audience experience of slow-motion footage is used to homomorphically represent characters' psychological experiences of events unfolding (2006: 148).

<sup>viii</sup> This does not require that the player's aim be to construct a decent narrative. Tavinor (2009: 114) argues that a player who, e.g., engages in so-called 'freeplay' need not be contributing to the quality of any narrative. For example, they may represent their character simply wandering around (87). The important point to make here is that the player may nevertheless represent their character as having intelligible reasons for acting, such as out of curiosity concerning their environment. By contrast, representing the character as repeatedly walking into a wall would likely thwart the intelligibility of that character.

<sup>ix</sup> For another discussion of the importance of intelligibility in engagement with fiction, see Matthew Kieran's (2001), which argues, roughly, that intelligibility mediates the link between moral and aesthetic value.

<sup>x</sup> There may be a useful connection to be made here with the discussion of imaginative resistance. Roughly put, Walton (1994) understands imaginative resistance in terms of the audience's *inability* to imagine morally problematic content, whilst Tamar Szabó Gendler (2000) understands it in terms of the audience's *unwillingness* to imagine morally problematic content. Our proposal utilises features of both 'can't' and 'won't' approaches to engagement with fiction, in that we suggest that someone has a reason to not play a game when they *want* to be somebody who *cannot* make sense of the motivations they would, by playing, represent characters as having. Whether this counts as a case of imaginative resistance (and if so, whether its structure generalises to give the best account of imaginative resistance in other cases) is something we leave open here.

<sup>xi</sup> There is a further question about how the use of first-person or third-person perspective might impact on the possibility of reflection and, thus, the potential rewards of engagement. Although we do not think there is any systematic connection between choice of perspective and what kinds of rewards a fiction can offer in terms of ethical reflection, it may, for instance, be that in some cases, choosing first-person over third-person perspective serves to make the audience feel the absence of a continual authoritative moral voice in the narrative and, thereby, to place them in a position where they are forced to construct an ethical outlook for themselves. Thanks to a referee for prompting us to say something about why choice of perspective can be ethically relevant.

<sup>xii</sup> Nevertheless, there may a *further* reason in the case of VP. Somebody's desire not to be somebody who finds paedophilic desire intelligible has to do with how they think of their own ethical identity, but it also has to do with how they think of their own *sexual* identity. In cases of VM where a prospective player would want not to be someone who finds certain motivations intelligible, their attitude reflects how they see their own ethical character, but is less likely to also reflect how they see their own sexuality.

<sup>xiii</sup> So, just as these considerations make it too hasty to attempt to maintain a cut-and-dried ethical distinction between all cases of VM and all cases of VP, they also make a blanket rejection of VM overly hasty. Those who do not feel the pull of Luck's original dilemma because they expect to find all VM games ethically problematic may have overlooked potential ethical rewards which it is easier to envisage as possibilities once we consider, from the point of view of aesthetics, what the nature of gameplay involves.

<sup>xiv</sup> Further, even if such an account is accepted, Ali would need to provide an account of the ethics of making things fictional of oneself, in order to support the idea that the desire to make it fictional that one does ethically problematic things is itself ethically problematic. (More generally, anyone who thinks that an appeal to things being fictional of the player is in itself relevant to the ethics of VM and VP must provide an ethics of making things fictional of oneself.)

<sup>xv</sup> In saying that players are 'invited' to homomorphically represent, we do not wish to claim that homomorphic representation must be something audiences experience themselves as making a deliberate choice to do. In cases of homomorphic representation, treating one's own experiences as representational resources may come as readily as treating images on screen as representational resources.

<sup>xvi</sup> We are not proposing this as an explanation of how the intuitions which the Gamer's Dilemma purports to capture would be widespread in everyday thinking about videogames. Our argument is that a degree of philosophical reflection on the nature of gameplay leads one to a point where concerns about the homomorphic representation of motivation (and, earlier, about what one wants to find intelligible) emerge as relevant.

<sup>xvii</sup> Christopher Bartel (2012) argues that the ethical difference between VM and VP is that VP is a form of pornography which sexualizes inequality, and VM is not. One might disagree with Bartel's proposal in various ways (see, e.g., Patridge (2013), Luck and Ellerby (2013)), but the suggestion we wish to make here is that our appeal to homomorphic representation provides an explanation of why there might be thought to be a link between pornographic representation and the ethics of VP. If we expect that players are to homomorphically represent desire, then we might also expect that players are invited to use the game pornographically in order to do this.

<sup>xviii</sup> There is a further question about what the considerations we have raised show about how people *other* than the player should feel about the fact that somebody plays the game. Our aim here has been to concentrate on the player themselves, and on how aesthetic considerations about playing give rise to ethical considerations from the player's point of view. Nevertheless, our answers to this question should also inform discussion of what others' ethical judgements of the player should be. If homomorphically representing desire were facilitated by pornographic engagement, for instance, then how others should judge the player would depend partly on how one should feel about somebody who engages pornographically with certain kinds of depiction of fictional children. Similarly, given our arguments in section 4, one relevant ethical consideration is how, when judging others, one should navigate differences in what individuals want to be (un)intelligible. Thanks to a referee for prompting us to say something about this further question.

<sup>xix</sup> Thanks to the audience at the White Rose Aesthetics Forum in June 2018, especially Matthew Kieran, for useful feedback on an earlier version, to Micheal Slade for discussion, and to two anonymous referees for their comments.