Virtual Morality   By Andrew Tuplin

Technology is dragging morality into some deep and murky philosophical waters, forcing us to reexamine our understanding of it as many of us choose to become actors in virtual worlds. By putting choice and consequence in closed virtual worlds where we can kill without harming others or facing punishment ourselves, we are forced to reconsider the case for moral behavior. New videogames such as *Grand Theft Auto IV* and online communities such as *Second Life*, invite an increasingly large percentage of society to participate in fantasy worlds where we are invited to experience life without rules – to be the bad guy or the sexual deviant. The implicit suggestion of these products is that, like gravity, morality does not necessarily exist in a virtual world. Morality and consequence can be switched off. Anything goes. It's an attractive proposition, one that undoubtedly contributed to the record breaking sales of *Grand Theft Auto IV*, which took in over $500 million in its first week. Morally questionable behavior provided by the game now includes lap dances, sex with prostitutes, killing prostitutes, killing cops, and of course, stealing autos.

Although *Grand Theft Auto IV* allows you to kill anything that walks, you cannot (yet) sex anything that walks. Sex in the game is restricted to prostitutes who willingly engage. This design choice has allowed the game maker, Rockstar Games, to negate some particularly unsettling in-game situations such as virtual rape or virtual pedophilia. Though I believe there would be a public outcry if such morally repellent things were included in the game, explaining exactly why virtual sex and murder are acceptable – while virtual rape is not – is a difficult argument.

The issue typically discussed around violent games such as Grand Theft Auto is that the violence or sexual behavior of the virtual worlds will surface in the real world – that violent games will eventually create violent people who do horrific things (videogames were repeatedly blamed following both Columbine and Virginia Tech. massacres, for instance). But there is another concern that has gone largely unaddressed that will become increasingly perplexing as videogames create better, more immersive models of reality: am I free to do anything I want in a virtual world, or are some things inherently wrong?

The Matrix Revolutions hints at the complicated relationship between morality and virtual reality through a subplot involving a husband, The Merovingian, and his wife, Persephone. Set in a future age where simulations of people – programs – are largely indistinguishable from real people, the Merovingian has a sexual tryst with a stunning blonde-haired program. Persephone takes revenge on her husband for his sexual dalliances by betraying him to the story's protagonists. In the scene of his betrayal, The Merovingian confronts Persephone, demanding to know the cause of her disloyalty. Persephone suggests her cause was her husband's own sexual disloyalty. Unable to refute her claim, the Merovingian points out that he has not been with a woman, he has been with a computer program. "It's just a game," he says. The essence of his argument is that morality is meant for governing how people interact with people, not how people interact with machines. Persephone offers no counterargument, and none is required. Regardless of any philosophical arguments, she feels offended by her husband's infidelity. This is one example, albeit a fictional one, which dispels the notion that virtual behavior has no real-world consequences.

Liberty City, the virtual world of *Grand Theft Auto IV*, is a much simpler virtual reality than that of *The Matrix*, but the essential questions of the role of morality within it still apply. The Merovingian's argument for sexual infidelity – it's just a game – is presumably the same argument used to justify Grand Theft Autos IV's virtual lap dances and killings. To be sure, the killing of a fictional character in a videogame cannot be judged on the same moral grounds as the killing of a person in the real world, but *The Matrix* suggests that morality and consequence cannot simply be ignored in virtual worlds.

The 2002 film *Minority Report*, based on Phillip K. Dick's short fiction, also projects a future in which there is a convergence of sexuality and technology. *Minority Report* imagines brothels of

the future where people purchase sexual fantasies made possible via technology. The film doesn't explore the moral implications of such technological innovation, but rather provides a picture of how technology can complicate our ideas about sex and what constitutes moral sexual conduct. In the wake of this kind of technological innovation, individuals as well as entire religious bodies will be forced to clarify exactly what it means to be faithful to one's partner. A second, perhaps more difficult question, also quickly follows: what kinds of fantasies should be condoned?

This question was recently debated in the online community of *Second Life* when it was found that certain members who presented themselves to the online world as children were engaging in virtual sexual acts with adult characters. This may have been allowed to go on, except that some actual child pornographic material was uploaded into the virtual world. Something interesting happened when *Second Life's* creator and controlling company, Linden Lab, issued a warning that such activity would not be tolerated. Some of the participants became angry, suggesting that Linden Lab has no business moderating the kinds of fantasies consenting adults participate in. It's a fight between people who see no moral boundaries in virtual worlds, and those who maintain that there is a place for morality in virtual worlds.

Religion takes an entirely different approach to morality than the model which governs society. Our legal systems attempt to enforce a moral standard upon the way people interact with each other. The purpose of state-imposed morality is to prevent harm. While secular morality condemns actions that harm others (precisely because they harm others), religion is more concerned with what offends God. From a religious perspective, harming your neighbor is wrong not only because it causes your neighbor pain, but also because your action makes God angry. This perspective shifts the gaze of morality from other to God. The first five commandments of the Decalogue do not address the mistreatment of one's neighbor (e.g. lying, stealing, murdering, committing adultery), but rather man's approach to God (e.g. creating idols, taking the Lord's name in vain, keeping the Sabbath day holy).

When Jesus began teaching and interpreting the moral code of the day, he radically redefined adultery, translocating the sin from the physical realm of actions and words to the virtual world of the mind and imagination. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus says, "You have heard the commandment that says, 'You must not commit adultery.' But I say, anyone who even looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart." What Jesus teaches is that God is concerned not only with what plays out in the physical world of actions (reality), but also with what takes place in the virtual world of our minds. A sociological approach to morality judges murder wrong because it harms an innocent person. A theological approach to morality finds murder sinful not only because of the physical act, but also because God is offended by an angry mind as well as violent hands. The humanist or secular view of morality is concerned only with what we do. True religious morality is concerned not only with what we do, but with who we are, with what we desire to do.

In virtual spaces, questions of moral behavior seem to have been passed over entirely, perhaps because, until recently, few games have been specifically designed to allow people to virtually participate in morally reprehensible behavior. The record-breaking sales of the Grand Theft Auto series guarantee that this will soon change. Such a huge market for the game has shown that there is a collective desire to immerse oneself in virtual misbehavior. The market demand for virtual lawlessness guarantees that developers will soon be rushing to the marketplace with games that offer increasingly realistic worlds and potential for morally suspect behaviour. How we will act in those worlds, and whether we object to their content, will stem from our understanding of the source of morality. Either we will be forced to concede that as long as no 'other' is being harmed, people are free to do absolutely anything (torture, rape, molest, murder, etc.), or we will conclude that morality does indeed have a place in virtual worlds.

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