



The repugnant resolution: has Coghlan & Cox resolved the Gamer's Dilemma?

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Abstract

Coghlan and Cox (Between death and suffering: Resolving the gamer's dilemma. *Ethics and Information Technology*) offer a new resolution to the Gamer's Dilemma (Luck, The Gamer's Dilemma. *Ethics and Information Technology*). They argue that, while it is fitting for a person committing virtual child molestation to feel self-repugnance, it is not fitting for a person committing virtual murder to feel the same, and the fittingness of this feeling indicates each act's moral permissibility. The aim of this paper is to determine whether this resolution – the repugnant resolution – successfully resolves the Gamer's Dilemma. We argue that it does not.

Keywords Gamer's Dilemma · Applied ethics · Moral disgust · Repugnance · Virtual actions · Video game ethics · Ethics of technology

Introduction

The Gamer's Dilemma (Luck, 2009a) is a paradox concerning the moral permissibility (henceforth permissibility) of two different acts we might perform when playing computer games. The first act is virtual murder; where a player intentionally directs their character to murder a NPC (a non-player character) in a computer game.¹ Virtual murder is commonplace, taking place within many hugely popular AAA franchises, such as *Grand Theft Auto*, *Red Dead Redemption*, and *The Elder Scrolls*. Presumably gamers who virtually murder don't consider their actions to be impermissible. But what reason could they give for this? The most obvious reason is that virtual murder is not real murder, no one is actually harmed, it's just a part of the

game.² But such reasons also apply to a less commonplace act – virtual child molestation.

Virtual child molestation occurs when a player directs their adult character to molest a child NPC in a computer game. Again, no one is actually molested, it's just part of the game. So, if virtual murder is permissible for the reasons given above, is virtual child molestation also permissible?

Although many gamers seem to have few qualms with virtual murder, we do seem to have qualms about virtual child molestation.³ Yet it has proven difficult to find a relevant moral difference between these acts – which is puzzling. This puzzle that can be captured in the form of a paradox:

P1 - Virtual murder is permissible.

P2 - There is no relevant difference between virtual murder and virtual child molestation, in respect to being permissible.

P3 - Virtual child molestation is impermissible.

This is the basic version of Gamer's Dilemma.

More nuanced formulations of the dilemma provide further details; for example, they limit the types of cases that

¹ Bourne and Bourne (2019) argue that the term "virtual murder" should be reserved for the act the game character performs, not what the player does. If correct, then the dilemma should be recast in terms of virtual murder: where players intentionally cause their character to virtually murder another in a computer game.

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² For arguments against the "just a game" defence (also known as the *Magic Circle Defence*) see Malaby (2007); Consalvo (2009); Luck, (2009b); Ostritsch (2017).

³ See Formosa et al. (2023) who conducted a study that suggested that people found virtual child molestation to be more "morally unacceptable" than virtual murder.

the dilemma encompasses (see Luck, 2022; Montefiore & Formosa, 2022), and distinguish between different versions of the dilemma (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, 2020; Ali, 2022) and/or different types of virtual actions (Öhman, 2020; Ramirez, 2020). Given this, a more accurate formulation of the dilemma might be:

P1* - X cases of virtual murder are permissible.

P2* - There is no relevant difference between X cases of virtual murder and Y cases of virtual child molestation, in respect to being permissible.

P3* - Y cases of virtual child molestation are impermissible.

X and Y refer to the types of cases the dilemma should be narrowed to. One particularly useful way to narrow the dilemma is given by Montefiore and Formosa (2022), who urge us to focus on cases where X and Y are appropriately analogous but still differ intuitively in terms of moral permissibility.

Montefiore and Formosa (2022) limit the cases of virtual murder and virtual child molestation to those that are appropriately analogous and trigger the dilemma's intuitions. For example, if we consider the permissibility of virtual murder in Counter-Strike, a first-person competitive shooter, then in comparison we should be considering the permissibility of virtual child molestation in an analogous setting.

To help us do this we might imagine Counter-Strike has two modes. The original mode, where one team plays as terrorists (who can murder their hostages) and the other team plays as the police (who aim to save the hostages), and a second modified mode, where one team plays as child molesters (who can molest their child hostages) and the other team play as the police (who aim to save the children). But everything else about these two modes should be,

equally positioned contextually, or as closely as possible, to the other (i.e., various contextual features, including degrees of player agency, perspective fidelity, context-realism and so on, are all kept the same for both modes). (Montefiore & Formosa, 2022, p. 13)

Having positioned X and Y in an appropriately analogous way, the set of cases in which X and Y differ in terms of moral permissibility, are those cases in which the Gamer's Dilemma survives, with presumably the above *Counter-strike* case being one of these. The reason for this limitation is to reduce noise.

This limitation reduces noise by removing various potentially distracting features from the cases in comparison. For example, if we were not to compare appropriately analogous cases, we might compare a game that depicts virtual child molestation with a very high level of graphic realism to a game that depicts virtual murder with a very low level

of realism. Such a comparison might lead us to think that this difference in realism is the relevant difference – it is what makes virtual child molestation impermissible but not virtual murder. But this wouldn't explain why there could remain a difference in permissibility when realism levels remain the same. So, limiting the dilemma in this way is a positive first step, as it makes it easier for us to look for a more widely applicable potentially relevant difference between these virtual acts (Luck, 2023).

Relevant differences are sought by those who seek a resolution to the dilemma (Bartel, 2012; Luck & Ellerby, 2013; Patridge, 2013; Young, 2016; Nader, 2020; Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, 2020; and Milne & Ivankovic, 2021, Luck, 2022). Those who seek to resolve the dilemma seek an argument against P2* – to show that there is a relevant difference between virtual murder and virtual child molestation (in respect to their permissibility). In their recent paper Coghlan and Cox (2023) offer a new resolution to the dilemma: the repugnant resolution. The aim of this paper is to determine whether this resolution successfully resolves the Gamer's Dilemma.

The repugnant resolution

Coghlan & Cox argue that there is a difference in permissibility between virtual murder and virtual child molestation (i.e. that P2* is false). This difference concerns self-repugnance. They argue that while it is fitting for a person committing virtual child molestation to feel self-repugnance, it is not fitting for a person committing virtual murder to feel the same. It is the fittingness of this feeling, rather than having the feeling itself, that indicates the possible permissibility of such acts. To better understand this resolution let us examine the arguments that support it, the first of which concerns when it is fitting to be disgusted.

We begin with the observation that it is sometimes fitting for a representation of an act to elicit genuine disgust. For example, upon first seeing Mr Creosote vomit over numerous restaurant patrons in Monty Python's *The Meaning of Life*, it may be fitting to be disgusted (on the presumption this is a disgusting act). We could capture this point in respect to virtual acts⁴ as follows:

⁴ The Gamer's Dilemma has been historically concerned with 'virtual acts', being acts that take place in video game environments (Luck, 2009a). However, recent work in the literature has considered whether the dilemma can be expanded to apply to fictional acts generally (see Luck, 2022; Luck, 2023; Montefiore & Formosa, 2023), as well as the extent to which focusing on the virtuality or fictionality of video game acts will shape the ethical approaches we take towards those acts (see Davnall, 2021; Montefiore & Podosky, 2024). In this paper we are taking 'virtual acts' to be a subset of 'fictional acts' insofar as they both have the shared feature of depicting fictionally

Argument A

1. It is fitting to be disgusted by disgusting acts.
2. Virtual act x is a disgusting act.

So,

3. It is fitting to be disgusted by virtual act x.

The takeaway is that it is sometimes fitting for a virtual act to elicit a real feeling of disgust. From this foundation Coghlan & Cox then turn to a particular type of disgust – one which has moral import.

Some acts are *morally disgusting*. Coghlan & Cox give the example of a fictional vivisection. Imagine a CGI dog suffering as it is being dissected by a villain, merely for their own amusement. In this case, we might feel visceral disgust, caused by the imagery itself, but we might also feel a type of moral disgust directed towards the villain because of their actions. Coghlan & Cox refer to this moral disgust as repugnance. Note that the object of disgust has been extended outwards from the act, to its perpetrator. So, we have two types of repugnant things: repugnant acts and repugnant characters. If such a reaction is fitting, then the following argument (which makes a similar move to argument A) could be mounted:

Argument B

1. It is fitting to find repugnant acts to be repugnant.
2. Virtual act x is a repugnant act.
3. It is fitting to find perpetrators of repugnant acts to be repugnant.
4. Virtual act x was perpetrated by virtual agent y.

So,

5. It is fitting to find virtual agent y to be repugnant (as the perpetrator of virtual act x).

If this argument holds then it may be fitting to find virtual agents repugnant because of the virtual acts they perpetrate. As Coghlan & Cox put it: “the repugnance of an action ordered generally infects the one ordering it” (Coghlan &

Cox, 2023, p. 7). But is it ever fitting to find non-virtual agents (i.e. real people) repugnant because of the virtual acts they might perpetrate? Coghlan & Cox think so.

Imagine again the fictional world where our villain is performing the vivisection on the CGI dog. As discussed, it may be fitting for us to find the villain's actions repugnant; and so, find the villain repugnant. But what if we learnt the villain was in fact compelled to perform such an action by a demon. If the villain had no autonomy, being fully controlled by the demon, it seems the demon was the real perpetrator; and so, the demon (and perhaps not the villain) is repugnant. This seems straight-forward – however a twist is coming.

Imagine now this fictional world is a computer game, and the demon is in fact a real person; a human player who controls the actions of the villain. Given this scenario, by adjusting premise 4 of the argument B, we can see how it might be fitting to find a non-virtual agent repugnant because of the virtual acts they perpetrate.

Argument C

1. It is fitting to find repugnant acts to be repugnant.
2. Virtual act x is a repugnant act.
3. It is fitting to find perpetrators of repugnant acts to be repugnant.
4. Virtual act x was perpetrated by non-virtual agent y.

So,

5. It is fitting to find non-virtual agent y to be repugnant (as the perpetrator of virtual act x).

Coghlan & Cox also point out that if you were agent y then it would be fitting to feel self-repugnance. They then link self-repugnance to impermissibility, stating that “Gameplay is impermissible if it generates the fittingness conditions for profound self-repugnance in players” (2023, 6). However, as their argument only requires that it is fitting to find such agents repugnant, we needn't concern ourselves further with who finds such agents to be repugnant.⁵

If it is fitting to find a perpetrator of some act repugnant, and, as Coghlan & Cox suggest, this indicates the impermissibility of this act, then we can move from 5 (the conclusion

representational content, however, virtual acts may have properties that some fictional acts lack (interactivity, for example (Brey, 1999). Coghlan & Cox appear to be adopting what Davnall (2021) refers to as a deflationary approach towards virtual acts, where they focus on virtual acts via their representational content. We will follow suit throughout.

⁵ If one wanted to explain why we have the intuition that virtual murder is permissible, but not virtual child molestation, the feeling of self-repugnance could potentially be very helpful. However, to resolve the dilemma we need an argument for why P2* is false – and not an explanation for the intuitions that support P1* and P3*. That is a separate (albeit related) project.

of the argument C) to the conclusion that some virtual act is impermissible.

Argument D

5. It is fitting to find non-virtual agent *y* to be repugnant (as the perpetrator of virtual act *x*).
6. If it is fitting to find non-virtual agent *y* to be repugnant (as the perpetrator of virtual act *x*) then virtual act *x* is impermissible.

So,

7. virtual act *x* is impermissible.

So, we now have in place a way of finding virtual acts to be impermissible. A result that could help us to resolve the Gamer's Dilemma.

Consider now that virtual act *x* is an instance of virtual child molestation. If virtual child molestation is a repugnant act, then we could conclude (given argument C) that it is fitting to find perpetrators of virtual child molestation to be repugnant, and so (given argument D) virtual child molestation itself will be impermissible. So far so good. But why can't we run the same argument for virtual murder? Coghlan & Cox believe it is because murder victims don't suffer.

There are different types of moral wrongs. Some moral wrongs cause suffering to their victims, like torture, assault, and molestation. Some moral wrongs may not cause suffering to their victims, like undetected invasions of privacy (e.g. a peeping Tom), undetected infidelity, and perhaps surprisingly according to Coghlan & Cox, murder. They argue that, murder victims don't suffer because, being dead, they lack the capacity to do so.⁶⁷ If true, this provides Coghlan & Cox with a wedge.

Moral wrongs that cause significant long-term suffering are what Coghlan & Cox refer to as violations.

Violation of a person is an assault on their bodily or psychological integrity apt to cause significant

⁶ We might challenge Coghlan & Cox on this point as there are horrible ways to die, such as being beaten to death, that do involve suffering. In reply they might suggest that in such cases the perpetrator is responsible for two things, assault and murder. And although murder must involve a person dying, it need not involve their suffering (for example, a well-placed shot to the head). This might suggest suffering is the result of something other than murder, such as assault. However, this conception conflicts with a broader understanding of murder, as an act that involves multiple events, with death being the final one.

⁷ We also put aside after-life possibilities here that might involve further suffering (e.g. Purgatory and Hell).

long-term suffering and moral injury. Sexual assault and rape, torture, bullying torment, and paedophilia abuse are all examples of personal violation. (Coghlan & Cox, 2023, p. 5)

Moral wrongs that constitute such violations cause suffering to their direct victims, and as such we are able to imagine this suffering. And the feeling of moral repugnance, Coghlan & Cox claim, "is a fitting response to the spectacle or imaginative reconstruction of ongoing suffering" (2023, 7). So, it is fitting to feel repugnance towards violations, and their perpetrators. But if a wrongdoing isn't a violation (as it doesn't cause suffering) then it wouldn't be fitting to feel repugnance towards it.

As virtual child molestation represents a violation, we are able to imagine the suffering of the virtual child involved. So, it is fitting that we feel repugnance towards virtual molestation. On the other hand, virtual murder doesn't represent a violation, Coghlan & Cox argue, as it doesn't cause its victim to suffer. Consequently, it is not fitting to feel repugnance with respect to virtual murder.⁸ A result that potentially allows repugnance to act as a relevant difference between these two virtual acts, and may accordingly resolve the Gamer's Dilemma.

Objections

Coghlan & Cox have provided us with a valuable insight into how some virtual wrongdoings might be impermissible. By focusing on the fittingness of repugnance, and showing how a virtual act may be genuinely repugnant, they provide a means by which a virtual wrongdoing might also be a real wrongdoing. In addition, the difference in suffering between murder and child molestation gives us a viable way to distinguish between the permissibility of virtual murder and virtual child molestation. However, several potential objections need to be considered before adopting this resolution.

Objection 1: repugnant people and repugnant acts

One might argue that the repugnant resolution is too strong. This is because it may render a paradigm case of a permissible virtual wrongdoing impermissible. And if this is the case, it ceases to track our intuitions concerning permissible gameplay.

This result comes about as Coghlan & Cox hold that you don't need to be a perpetrator of a violation to be a repugnant person. For instance, "cold-blooded indifference to life of a professional killer is an example of a

⁸ A move which we will put pressure on in Sect. 3.5.

morally repugnant character trait” (2023, 5). However, many gamers seem to hold a similar kind of indifference – an indifference to representations of life. For example, a paradigm case in the literature of a permissible virtual wrongdoing is running over an innocent pedestrian and murdering them, in *Grand Theft Auto*. To do this without blinking an eye is, presumably, to respond to one’s virtual actions with a kind of cold blooded or pernicious indifference to the moral significance of murder.⁹ Such indifference, it could be argued, may be sufficient to generate the fittingness conditions for repugnance.

Coghlan & Cox also suggest that a virtual act is impermissible “if it generates the fittingness conditions for profound self-repugnance in players” (2023, 6). So, bringing together these two points suggests that virtually running over the pedestrian may be impermissible. However, given that this is a paradigm case of a permissible virtual wrongdoing (or at least taken to be morally distinct to virtual child molestation), the repugnant resolution seems to deliver the wrong result. So, it may be too strong.

There are at least two possible replies to this objection.

First, it is unclear whether a perpetrator’s repugnance is always sufficient to make their actions repugnant. A perpetrator’s repugnance concerns the way they are, and not what they do. Of course, certain acts might help reveal the perpetrator’s repugnance – but this doesn’t mean such acts are themselves repugnant. For example, if a murderer buys a book entitled *How to Get Away with Murder* this purchase might reveal (at least partly) their repugnant character. However, the same action wouldn’t reveal the repugnance of a detective who purchases the book in order to solve a difficult case.

Given this distinction, Coghlan & Cox, might maintain that a murderer who holds a “cold-blooded indifference to life” should feel repugnance regarding the way they are, but (since they can’t imagine the suffering of their murder victims) it is only fitting that they feel remorse regarding their murderous actions. This would mean that the act of virtual murder could remain non-repugnant even if its perpetrator was repugnant. A result that may then allow repugnance to potentially function as a relevant distinction between virtual murder and virtual child molestation.

Second, as previously discussed (in Sect. 1.0), Montefiore and Formosa (2022) urge us to limit the cases in comparison to those that are appropriately analogous. So, if we consider a case where the virtual murderer’s character is repugnant, then we should compare this to a case

where the virtual child molester’s character is also repugnant. And in such cases, if the repugnance of a perpetrator’s character were to infect their virtual acts – making them impermissible – the dilemma wouldn’t hold. For both virtual acts would come out as impermissible. This would be similar to comparing cases where both virtual murder and virtual child molestation are displayed in graphic and gruesome detail. In such cases both virtual acts may seem impermissible, in which case the dilemma doesn’t seem to hold.

So, considering such cases is of little help. For, if the perpetrator’s repugnance does indicate the impermissibility of their virtual acts, then, in order to focus on those places where the dilemma holds, we should exclude these cases. That is, the dilemma should be limited to cases where a perpetrator’s character doesn’t predetermine the impermissibility of their actions. Instead, we should position both virtual child molestation and virtual murder in a contextually equal setting where each perpetrator is only repugnant in relation to the virtual action caused, rather than any aspect of their moral character that would predetermine their repugnance (like possessing cold-blooded indifference to these virtual wrongdoings). In other words, the perpetrator may be repugnant, but only to the extent that the repugnance of the act has infected the perpetrator.

To achieve this, we can adopt Coghlan & Cox’s description of a player who, rather than acting virtually out of malice or contempt (in a repugnant way), instead engages with their virtual acts (virtual murder or virtual child molestation) lightly, insofar as they understand them to be game acts, yet they do not treat their moral significance with a “pernicious indifference”. In this way, we are better able to focus upon objections to the virtual acts themselves. We shall proceed with this restriction in mind, and narrow the cases to those where it is the virtual action that makes the perpetrator’s character repugnant, and not the perpetrator’s character that makes the action repugnant.

However, we should keep in mind that, even though narrowing the dilemma in this manner allows us to proceed, there remains a possibility that a paradigm case of a permissible virtual wrongdoing (i.e. indifferently running over a pedestrian in *Grand Theft Auto*) may be impermissible if the repugnant resolution holds. So, if we broaden the cases of virtual murder and virtual child molestation to those where the perpetrator of the virtual act is indifferent to representations of wrongdoings, this resolution may not deliver the right results in these cases. And if this resolution is unable to distinguish between *all* permissible cases of virtual murder and all impermissible cases

⁹ One could respond that the kind of indifference displayed in this case is not pernicious. However, it is unclear what would be additionally required of one’s indifference to the moral significance of their virtual act’s depiction, that would make one’s indifference pernicious.

of virtual child molestation, then this may count against its capacity to resolve the dilemma more broadly.

Objection 2: suffering and indirect victims

Coghlan & Cox argue that, as murder victims don't suffer (since they are dead), murder does not constitute a violation, and so it is not fitting to feel repugnance towards this act (although remorse would be fitting). However, why limit the suffering caused by murder to the direct victim? Murder also causes other people to suffer, such as those who loved the direct victim. We can think of these people as the indirect victims of murder, and we can imagine their suffering. But, if repugnance "is a fitting response to the spectacle or imaginative reconstruction of ongoing suffering" (2023, 7) then murder would be repugnant when it causes such indirect suffering. And if this is the case, then both virtual murder and virtual child molestation may be repugnant; in which case, this property is no longer able to function as a relevant distinction.

One response to this objection, would be to point out that those computer games that allow virtual murder do not often provide an insight into such indirect suffering. For example, when a player runs over a pedestrian in Grand Theft Auto, we know little about how this act will affect those they leave behind. So, it can be difficult to imagine the suffering of such indirect virtual victims.

However, no one needs to imagine the suffering of an indirect victim for an act to be fittingly repugnant; it need only be the case that it would be fitting to feel repugnance were someone to properly imagine it. In other words, the imaginative difficulties players may face are no obstacle to the fittingness of repugnance. So, this response to the objection misses the mark.

A second response to this objection would involve limiting the cases under discussion to those where there are no indirect victims. For example, imagine a computer game where, in murder mode, you play a killer robot who aims to murder the last human. And in molestation mode, the robot's aim is to molest the last human (who is a child). In such a case, the Gamer's Dilemma may still hold – with it being permissible to play in murder mode, but not in molestation mode. In this case, we might point to repugnance as a relevant difference as it is a fitting response to molestation mode, but not murder mode (for the murder causes no direct or indirect suffering).

However, this is just one type of game. And there seems to be no good reason why we should apply this limitation (to do so seems *post hoc*). This is because the Gamer's Dilemma still seems to hold in cases where the person being murdered/molested isn't the last human (so there may well be indirect suffering). In which case, if indirect suffering is

a fitting imaginative trigger for repugnance, then this distinction would not be available to resolve this wider set of valid cases.

Objection 3: repugnance and the wider dilemma

Let us assume that Coghlan & Cox have good reason to limit the suffering we imagine when considering virtual acts to their direct victims. Even with this limitation in place there remains further objections.

Luck (2022) points out that the Gamer's Dilemma seems to apply more widely than virtual murder and virtual child molestation. To make this point he gives the example of another set of virtual actions that also seems like a valid instance of the Gamer's Dilemma.

Within some computer games, such as The Sims, players can trap innocent characters in door-less bare rooms for simulated years, in circumstances such, were the game world actual, it would be false imprisonment of a most tortuous kind. Yet we hardly blink an eye. However, if a game were introduced which enabled players to direct their Viking hordes to rape the women of a village, we would be less dismissive. (Luck, 2022, 1299)

If this is a valid alternative instance of the Gamer's Dilemma, then we need to look for a resolution that applies to it also. In other words, we need a resolution for the wider Gamer's Dilemma.

However, it seems unlikely that the repugnant resolution is able to resolve the wider Gamer's Dilemma. This is because, just as we can imagine the direct suffering caused by virtual child molestation or virtual rape, we can also imagine the direct suffering caused by false imprisonment. In which case, it also seems fitting to find the perpetrators of such acts to be repugnant. But if this is the case, then repugnance is no longer providing a relevant difference between these virtual acts.

One possible response to this objection would be to suggest that, although imprisonment involves suffering, it doesn't involve a violation, whereas rape does. So, the repugnant resolution is able to deal with this alternative instance of the wider dilemma. However, Coghlan & Cox state that the "Violation of a person is an assault on their bodily or psychological integrity apt to cause significant long-term suffering and moral injury" (2023, 5). And, given that the solitary confinement of a person in a windowless room for simulated years does seem like an assault on a person's psychological integrity apt to cause significant long-term suffering and moral injury, such an act seems to constitute a violation.

Consequently, even if we were to limit the imaginative suffering caused by these virtual acts to their direct victims,

the repugnant resolution may still be unable to resolve such instances of the wider Gamer's Dilemma.

Objection 4: repugnance and impermissibility

A different line of objections may stem from a consideration of the relationship repugnance has to moral impermissibility.

Coghlan & Cox claim that,

a player, in directing their character to sexually assault a child, would themselves be acting repugnantly. They are not merely directing their game character to act repugnantly; they are acting repugnantly in so directing their game character. (2023, 7)

And if a player is acting repugnantly then, according to Coghlan & Cox, their actions are impermissible. But is this the case? Are repugnant acts actually impermissible? To help us answer this question we might consider whether there are any morally permissible cases of virtual child molestation. That is, cases of virtual child molestation where the perpetrator may be acting repugnantly, but not impermissibly.

One such case might be an instance of virtual child molestation that is unambiguously contributing towards morally reflective gameplay. Imagine a serious game that is developed to help others better understand the profound, and perhaps lesser known, harms caused by the act. In this game it may be clear that the act being depicted is repugnant, and that the virtual molester's character is repugnant. But it may be less clear that the player (who is role-playing as the molester to explore the deeper issues the developers hope to raise) is acting impermissibly (see Young, 2016; Patridge, 2011, 2013; Ali, 2015; Tavinor, 2017). Keep in mind that (as we discussed in objection 1) we are limiting our cases to those in which the player is treating their virtual acts lightly insofar as they understand them to be game acts.

One could reply that in such a case the player isn't repugnant, even though they are the perpetrator of a repugnant act, and this is why their conduct might still be permissible. But then we have a possible instance of a repugnant virtual act that doesn't make the perpetrator of the act repugnant, which won't align with Coghlan & Cox's view that repugnant acts make one repugnant (premise 3 of argument C would be false, that 'It is fitting to find perpetrators of repugnant acts to be repugnant').

Note that in such a case the Gamer's Dilemma doesn't seem to hold. For if virtual molestation was permissible in this case, then appropriately analogous cases of virtual murder would also be permissible. However, the point here is to put pressure on the link between repugnance and impermissibility, insofar as it may sometimes be permissible for a player to direct their game character to perform repugnant

acts, which in turn raises doubts as to whether repugnance is really the property that is determining permissibility.

Objection 5: violations and impermissibility

Consider the following case:

In order to convince you that red lollies are less healthy than green apples, your friend claims that red foods are less healthy than non-red foods. However, you have doubts about this claim; for some red foods (such as red apples) seem just as healthy, if not healthier, than some non-red foods (like green lollies).

One might raise a similar kind of doubt concerning Coghlan & Cox's claim that virtually violative acts (like virtual molestation) are morally worse than virtually non-violative acts (like virtual murder). This is because there may be some virtually violative acts that seem just as bad for a player to perform, if not morally better, than some virtually non-violative acts. It is this possibility that we shall consider now.

To illustrate this possibility, consider a hypothetical video game called *High School Hell*. The game isn't overly realistic, immersive, agential and so on, nor is it overly unrealistic, non-immersive, non-agential and so on. For example, the game gives you a sufficient degree of agency over your virtual acts, insofar as it is sensible to credit yourself for your in-game acts. However, you still feel as though the game is nonetheless limited in the scope of choices available to you.

You play as Sid, a vicious school kid, who torments other children in the playground. You as a player, however, are not vicious. That is, you are not indifferent to the moral significance of the acts you are engaging in. In fact, you are deeply sensitive to the virtual consequences of your acts to the point that you often feel guilty and remorseful, and are often reminded how different you are to the character you are playing as. Now imagine the game has two modes.

In mode one you act as a bully. The game involves humiliating an innocent child named Lucy. You can call her horrible names in front of other children – humiliating her (see Halliday et al. (2021) on the profound long-term suffering such verbal bullying is apt to cause). (We could imagine a 'suffering scale' that rewards points for how successfully you can torment other children and get away with it when the teacher isn't looking.) After bullying Lucy, you see her in the playground crying. Later in the game her dad arrives to collect her from school and finds his upset child, also causing him great distress.

In mode two you act as a murderer. The game now involves inviting Lucy out behind the sheds to kill her. You then throw her body in a pit and bury her. (We could imagine

a ‘death scale’ that rewards points for how successfully you can kill other children and get away with it.) Whenever you go behind the sheds throughout the game, you can see where you left her body. Lucy’s dad arrives to collect her from school but can’t find her causing him great distress. Later in the game there are also missing person posters and after enough in-game time a candlelight vigil is held in her memory.

Is it the case that playing the game in bully mode is impermissible, while playing it in murder mode is permissible? Coghlan & Cox seem to think so – claiming that,

Sexual assault and rape, torture, *bullying torment*, and paedophile abuse are all examples of personal violation [emphasis added]. (2023, 5)

So, if virtual violations are impermissible (due to their repugnance) then playing the game in bully mode will be impermissible. Whereas the same is not true of murder mode (as murder is a non-violative wrongdoing). But even if playing the game in bully mode is impermissible, does it really seem that much worse than playing the game in murder mode? If not, then we have reason to doubt this connection between violations and impermissibility.

It is worth noting that although we have compared bullying to child murder, the same point could be made by comparing bullying to other non-violative wrongdoings – such as the genocide of a people by dropping a nuclear bomb on them, killing them all instantly. This is not clearly an issue for the repugnant resolution insofar as one might commit virtual genocide in *Civilisation VI* in a permissible way, while virtual molestation in *Rapelay* remains impermissible. The issue for the resolution is that, for those people who don’t find virtual bullying to be worse than all other such appropriately analogous non-violative virtual wrongdoings (like virtual child murder or virtual genocide, etc.) it may be that violations are not doing the work we require of them.

It should also be highlighted that the game’s bully mode doesn’t sit on any contextual extreme, and is appropriately analogous to the murder mode.¹⁰ However, this could be adjusted so the acts could be compared across a range of contexts. This would not only show that some virtual violative acts (like virtual bullying) may not be worse than some virtual non-violative acts (like virtual murder) when examined in just low or high realism contexts, but also that this holds across varying degrees of contextual realism. Of course, on both contextual extremes these acts may come out as permissible or impermissible. But the point here is that one virtual act doesn’t appear to become more or less wrong in relation to the other when positioned in different

contexts. This counts against the repugnant resolution, as this objection will then hold across a range of contexts.

Objection 6: repugnance and fitting repugnance

Coghlan & Cox hold that it is the fittingness of repugnance that provides a relevant difference between the permissibility of virtual wrongdoings. But when exactly is it fitting to find an act repugnant? If repugnance “is a form of disgust, a strongly negative emotional response to morally inflected states of affairs” (Coghlan & Cox, 2023, p. 5), then presumably it is fitting in those cases where we *should* have such a response to an act. But this only pushes the question back, as what we now want to know is,

What is it about an act that makes it the case that we *should* find it repugnant?

One possible answer to this question is,

We should find an act to be repugnant if, and only if, it is a violation.

This answer would explain why repugnance is a “a fitting emotional response to the witness and imaginative reconstruction of violation and profound suffering” (2023, 7). However, Coghlan & Cox state that a “Violation of a person is an *example* of a morally repugnant action [emphasis added]” (2023, 5). In other words, they are only claiming that,

If an act is a violation, then we should find it to be repugnant.

In other words, they are not claiming that if an act is repugnant it must be a violation. However, if violations are only an example of a repugnant act, then presumably there are non-violations that may also be repugnant.

For example, consider the following case: a rapist employs a date rape drug to render their victims unconscious. This act may not be, according to Coghlan & Cox, a violation – if it isn’t “apt to cause significant long-term suffering” (2023, 7) (on the assumption the victim never suspects what has occurred). However, such an act still seems repugnant (and impermissible). Similar results may arise from instances of necrophilia, bestiality or the molestation of an infant – if in such cases the victim isn’t properly aware of the abuse. We could also consider a case where you torture someone in such a way as to ensure their imminent death – for in such a case the victim’s suffering is not long-term (which is a necessary property of a violation according

¹⁰ So it has the practical benefits described by Montefiore & Formosa’s (2022) as outlined in section ‘How Low Will You Go’.

to Coghlan & Cox). Such cases illustrate the possibility that not all repugnant acts may be violations.

However, if non-violations can be repugnant, this opens up the possibility that murder might still be repugnant. Coghlan & Cox have argued that murder doesn't represent a violation, as murder victims do not suffer. This move seems correct – on the understanding that victims of violations necessarily suffer. They then go on to argue that, because of this, it is not fitting to feel repugnance towards murder. However, this move doesn't seem correct – as being a violation is only an example of a repugnant act. In other words, Coghlan & Cox need to do more than show that murder isn't a violation to demonstrate that murder isn't repugnant.

Another reason as to why it would be helpful to know when we should regard an action as repugnant is because, historically, there has been significant disagreement about what things are repugnant. For example, prostitution, surrogacy, egg donation, organ transplantation, and same-sex relations (Krawiec, 2023) are all things which people have (and continue to have) different intuitions regarding their repugnance. So, if fitting repugnance does determine a virtual wrongdoing's permissibility, having some kind of moral grounds for establishing what makes something fittingly repugnant would be of great help. Otherwise, acts that wrongly provoke repugnance and acts which rightly provoke repugnance cannot be justifiably distinguished.

And although repugnance may act as *prima facie* evidence to direct moral judgements, it doesn't seem clear that it can exhaustively justify them. What is making the repugnance some people feel about same-sex relationships unfitting, and the repugnance of child molestation fitting? It is, at least partly, that the latter is morally wrong behaviour, and the former isn't. Therefore, to determine whether repugnance is a fitting reactive attitude to an act must involve addressing the upstream question of the act's moral permissibility. However, if this is the case, this may undermine the normative work that Coghlan & Cox claim repugnance is doing.

To address these concerns, one might appeal to an underlying moral feature that would make repugnance fitting. For example, we could appeal to acts that undermine a person's dignity. For it could be argued that all victims of violations are undermined in this way, and perhaps some non-violative acts might also have this effect. However, care must be taken here. For if ending someone's life undermines their dignity, then murder may also come out as repugnant. In which case, virtual murder might then be deemed impermissible, and we are back to the drawing board. So, pinning down the correct underlying feature may be tricky.

The central challenge for the Gamer's Dilemma is that it isn't clear what moral feature could make virtual child molestation morally impermissible that isn't also applicable

to virtual murder. Virtual child molestation very well may provoke a feeling of repugnance, but whether it is fitting for it to provoke repugnance just takes us back to the Gamer's Dilemma. For the dilemma asks what moral feature would justify a virtual wrongdoing's impermissibility (which may or may not involve the reactive attitude of repugnance). In other words, repugnance may lack a clear moral justificatory basis that will delineate a moral distinction required for a resolution to the Gamer's Dilemma.

Weakening the repugnant resolution

We have argued that the repugnant resolution faces several objections that challenge its capacity to be considered a compelling normative approach to resolving the Gamer's Dilemma. However, the view may fare better against some (but not all) of the objections presented if it is weakened in a way that it appears Coghlan & Cox may seek to do. This is by arguing that it is only *generally* the case that virtual acts that constitute a violation ground the fitting conditions for the act's repugnance and its according moral impermissibility. In other words, if they claim that it is not *necessarily* the case that virtual violative acts warrant repugnance.

Presumably, those virtual acts that may not warrant repugnance are those virtual violative acts that occur at very low degrees of realism or immersion, such as virtual violative acts that are poorly described rather than vividly depicted. It is also worth remembering that Coghlan & Cox suggest that some virtual non-violative acts can still be repugnant. For example, when the virtual act is accompanied by the perpetrator's repugnant stance towards it. For example, in the case of virtual murder, when the "murderer acted with depravity, out of malice or contempt, if they respond to their actions with indifference, then self-repugnance is only fitting" (Coghlan & Cox, 2023, p. 7).

For a weakened version of the repugnant resolution some of the above objections may become less problematic. This is because there may remain a wider range of cases of virtual violative acts than virtual non-violative acts, in which it is fitting to find the act repugnant (and accordingly morally impermissible). In other words, the virtual action type of virtual child molestation *qua* violative act may have more token instances across a range of contexts which make repugnance fitting, than the contextually analogous token instances of the virtual action type of virtual murder *qua* non-violative act. How wide this range may be, however, is unclear.

This is all to say that it is possible that arguments C and D could be run where virtual act x is an instance of child molestation, but not where virtual act x is murder, *across more cases*. This is because, in more cases, premise 2 of

argument C (that virtual act x is a repugnant act) may be true for virtual child molestation (as a violation), but not for virtual murder. So, there might be a range of cases, where a morally relevant difference between virtual child molestation and virtual murder could be identified; being those cases where repugnance is warranted for virtual child molestation, but not for the contextually analogous cases of virtual murder. In these cases, $P2^*$ would be false, and as a result the Gamer's Dilemma would be resolved.

Conclusion

Coghlan & Cox argue that an appeal to a virtual act's repugnance will resolve the Gamer's Dilemma. Virtual child molestation is fittingly repugnant while virtual murder is not, and this feature distinguishes it in terms of moral permissibility. This approach is promising in a number of ways. First, as with other work in the literature (Young, 2016; Bartel, 2012; Luck, 2022), the repugnant resolution highlights a way in which a virtual act, while virtual, may be nonetheless immoral. Second, the repugnant resolution somewhat accords with recent empirical work that found individuals appealing to virtual sexual assault's being 'disgusting' or 'repugnant' to justify its immorality (Formosa et al., 2023). This attitude of repugnance towards sexual assault also seems to be scalable to other media types and indicates that repugnance may be a helpful resource for considering the dilemma's broader more broad formulations (see Davnall, 2021; Luck, 2022; Luck, 2023; Montefiore & Formosa, 2023). So, regardless of whether repugnance is able to provide normative grounds for distinguishing between virtual murder and virtual child molestation, it seems possible that it could play a descriptive role in *explaining* the intuitions underlying the Gamer's Dilemma.

Further, rather than the repugnant resolution being able to resolve the Gamer's Dilemma by itself, a weaker version may instead *contribute* to a resolution, or at least a descriptive explanation. This is because repugnance seems to be one of several morally relevant features of virtual child molestation (and other virtual 'off-limits' wrongdoings) that have been identified in the Gamer's Dilemma literature that may *generally* distinguish it from virtual murder (and other virtual 'fair game' wrongdoings) across a wide range of cases.

However, the repugnant resolution appears to suffer from several substantial objections which raise doubts as to whether it is able to contribute towards normatively resolving the Gamer's Dilemma. Addressing the objections presented here would greatly aid its capacity to resolve it.¹¹

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Data availability Given the theoretical nature of this paper, we do not generate or analyse any datasets.

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