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The Ethics of Virtual Gaming Spaces: An Inquiry into "Virtualized Killing"

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Abstract: Killing behavior in video games, as a cultural phenomenon unique to the digital age, has always been at the core of ethical controversy. Judgments regarding the ethical legitimacy of such behavior should consistently prioritize the player's subjective will: when players engage in the game voluntarily and without subjective malicious intent, virtualized killing possesses moral immunity due to its detachment from the real-world moral context. However, players' cognitive perceptions are often dually influenced by technological and rule-based factors, forming new moral concepts during specific gaming practices.

Keywords: Video games; Killing behavior, Player dimension; Technology dimension; Design dimension.

1. Introduction

With the advancement of digital technology, the video game industry has rapidly expanded. Especially for the new generation of youth as digital natives, video games have become an indispensable part of life. Within the virtual spaces created by video games, players interact with other players, game developers, and algorithms through gaming terminals. This sustained interaction implies that games inherently possess certain ethics and morality. Indeed, the incorporation of moral and ethical dilemmas in game design has become a crucial path to enhancing player immersion. Particularly with the advent of virtual reality technology, the boundary between games and reality has become increasingly blurred (CHEN Y. H., TIAN Y. Q.2016). Games that offer heightened sensory stimulation and more realistic narrative rules challenge players' genuine moral sensibilities, and social interactions within games gradually permeate real-world life.

As a unique form of social interaction in the digital age, video games should evidently be subject to certain ethical norms constraining player behavior. However, the ethical norms within virtual gaming spaces are not identical to those of the real world, particularly evident in the game mechanic of "virtualized killing." According to the 2024 China Game Industry Report, the actual sales revenue of the domestic game market reached 325.783 billion RMB in 2024, with the user scale reaching 674 million people. Within this thriving market, action and shooter games with violent elements are highly popular. Among the top 100 mobile game products by revenue, Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) games accounted for 17.99%, Role-Playing Games (RPG) for 17.85%, and Shooter games for 13.89%, together constituting 49.73% of total revenue. The core gameplay of battle arena and shooter games is precisely "virtualized killing," and many RPGs also incorporate this mechanic. This reflects the moral contradiction where "killing," universally regarded as immoral in the real world, is widely accepted within virtual gaming spaces. It is precisely this disjunction and connection between real-world ethical norms and those of the virtual gaming world that fuels the ongoing debate over the ethical legitimacy of "virtualized killing."

Defenders of "virtualized killing" in games insist that the "killing" behavior does not involve the loss of actual life and causes no substantive harm to real-world individuals, thus cannot be considered immoral. However, the blurring of boundaries between game scenarios and the real world means that in-game actions can potentially cause real-world harm. For instance, "virtual sexual assault" in VR interactive games demonstrably inflicts severe psychological trauma on victims (Lu Q., 2022). Another line of criticism focuses on the impact on the real world, emphasizing that video games lead to increased violence, particularly among immature minors. They argue that players might develop motivations to commit similar violent acts in the real world due to the violent killings depicted in games, posing a potential threat to societal safety. However, no conclusive evidence exists proving a necessary link between virtual and real-world violence. Research by psychologist Patrick Markey, for example, shows that only about 20% of school shooters played such "killing-type" video games, while around 70% of normal young males are interested in them (Ferguson, C. J., & Markey, P. M., 2017). In other words, those who commit severe violent acts actually have less exposure to violent games than average players. This result suggests that virtual violence itself is not a primary cause of real-world violence. Yet, based on semi-structured interviews by Consalvo et al.: even virtual violence performed under the guise of a "hero" and motivated by altruism can cause psychological discomfort in some players, who believe it might influence their real-world behavior (Consalvo, M., 2005). Therefore, from a psychological consequentialist perspective, virtualized killing in video games does cause certain harm.

Thus, simplistically equating "virtualized killing" with real-world violence, or judging its moral attribute solely based on "the impact of in-game actions on the real world," lacks empirical support and risks obscuring deeper ethical issues. It overlooks the complex interactive nature of the subjects involved and the virtuality confined to specific gaming spaces. In essence, this simplistic consequentialism ignores two key dimensions: first, the player's agency and choice within the game; second, the behavioral environment constituted by technological fidelity and rule structures.(CUI Y. F., ZHANG Z. Z. 2020) Building on this, this paper proposes a triadic interactive framework of "Player-Technology-Rule" attempting to transcend single-dimensional content-centric criticism and shift towards a

structural discussion of the moral significance of virtual actions.

2. Player Dimension: The Premise of Moral Immunity

Players always occupy the dominant position in video games. It is the player who acts within the virtual gaming space and inhabits specific virtual moral situations. Therefore, when the consequences of "virtualized killing" are ambiguous, the moral attribute of the action can only be judged by the player themselves. At least from the perspective of motivation, players should not do what they consider immoral.

Past game scholars often defended the amorality of virtualized killing in games by emphasizing that the game space is not bound by real-world ethical norms. Johan Huizinga argued that "play is a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy, and the consciousness that it is 'different' from 'ordinary life'" (Huizinga, J., 2007). By creating its own independent rules, play establishes a specific order, forming a closed "magic circle" with strict boundaries separating it from the real world. Consequently, real-world ethical norms have no authority over actions within the game space. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (Salen, K., & Zimmerman, E., 2003) further elaborated on the "magic circle," describing it as the concept of "the special space created within the time and space of play." Clearly, under their theoretical construction, the virtual space created by games, as an independent and closed space, prevents real-world ethical norms from intervening, rendering games "amoral" – commonly expressed as "it's just a game."(YANG L. Z., ZOU X. Y., DONS BERGEN. ,1995) In other words, when players voluntarily enter the "game world," they implicitly accept the rule system constructed by that virtual world, permitting harmful acts within those rules. In this process, players' actions are no longer judged solely by real-world ethical standards but are transformed into actions nested within the logic of the virtual space. The player's "virtual body" operates as an embodied agent within specific technological architectures and rule frameworks. Therefore, in-game actions should primarily be understood and evaluated within their internal rules and context, rather than simplistically judged by real-world ethical frameworks. For example, in competitive sports like rugby or boxing, injuries suffered by players within the rules are typically seen as amoral. If an opponent accidentally injures another during a match and the injured party seeks to hold them accountable, spectators often view this as violating the spirit of competition. However, this view has clear limitations, as it fails to explain our intuitive sense that "pedophilic" games are immoral.

Addressing this issue, Melvin Chen argues that the virtual environment in video games is not completely severed from the real world, and the "magic circle" cannot block all interventions of real-world ethical norms. Behaviors like "virtual pedophilia," which "reflect tendencies towards reprehensible actions in the real world," should be constrained by real-world ethical norms. She thus proposes the "Import-Export Principle" based on the magic circle concept. This principle emphasizes the connection between the virtual environment and the real world, suggesting that certain moral norms can be "imported" or "exported" between them. Behaviors closely related to the real world should be governed by real-world ethical norms (Chen, M., 2023). However, she doesn't sufficiently explain why "virtual pedophilia" is more closely linked to the real world than "virtualized killing," nor does she specify exactly when which principle should apply. Some scholars respond in a "MacIntyrean" fashion, arguing that games provide virtual scenarios that justify "killing" – such as being forced to kill enemies in war, where the opponent is a villain and the player is an executioner, or killing to win rather than for its own sake. Thus, "virtualized killing" in such contexts is morally exempt and acceptable to most players (ZENG Q. ,2024). However, "virtual pedophilia" cannot find any justification; it is always immoral in any context because it invariably reflects a malicious desire to harm others. Yet this explanation is insufficient, as moral evaluations of killing vary individually. Pre-set game scenarios cannot guarantee every player agrees the action is moral. Consider a devout Christian: in the real world, he might believe killing enemies even in war is wrong, yet in a game world, he might kill an "enemy" without guilt because he is certain his action harms no "life" as he understands it. He clearly knows that the "killing" behavior in the game signifies no loss of actual life – not even the destruction of data (defeated characters respawn infinitely) – but is merely an exaggerated depiction of "defeat" in the real-world game context. "Killing" a character in-game is no different from "capturing" a piece in chess. Therefore, players can perform "virtualized killing" without harboring any malice they themselves recognize. However, if a participant brings the subjective motive of malicious harm into the game space, the "magic circle" is broken. The player ceases to be a role-player acting within permitted rules and becomes someone attempting to realize violent tendencies, constrained by morality or law in reality, through the virtual environment. For example, a boxer striking an opponent within the rules to win is justified, but if the boxer participates solely to inflict harm, the act is immoral. Crucially, this "malicious desire" doesn't require an absolute standard but relies more on the player's personal, comprehensive, rational moral belief system outside the game. For instance, someone holding the belief "one must never harm others under any circumstances" would likely refuse to participate in boxing because they couldn't strike an opponent without malice. This parallels how most people today cannot morally accept Russian roulette, a game wagering lives, because they cannot believe participants lack malice. This does not mean that if someone believes pedophilia is moral, they can freely indulge that desire in video games. A rational person with moral sensitivity cannot find any justification for pedophilic acts; even in a virtual world, the act itself contains an inexcusable malice. Thus, a key prerequisite for video games to suspend real-world ethical judgment is that players do not bring subjective malice into their gaming attitude.

Players' voluntary choice to enter the game space is also crucial for maintaining the gaming attitude. "A forced activity ceases at once to be play" (Huizinga, J., 2007). Like slaves forced to fight in the arena, the harm they inflict and endure is involuntary, and the slave masters forcing them to "play" bear the moral responsibility. In video games, this "coercion" is often implicit. As Emma Vossen's research indicates, the phenomenon of female characters in many games being harassed by male players due to being forced into sexy attire is actually a form of structural oppression within games against female players (Vossen, E., 2007). This stems from

the peculiarity of video games: players are often not fully aware of the situations they will encounter or the potential harm they might suffer; they learn the rules gradually during gameplay. More importantly, players can only face pre-set game rules; they can choose to accept or reject them but lack the authority to modify them. Players might accept some unsatisfactory rules to enjoy other aspects of the game experience. For instance, some games might stipulate that a player's virtual character loses significant in-game resources upon "death," and players usually learn this rule during gameplay. Even if unwilling to suffer such "virtual harm," they are forced to accept it. Or, when players deem part of the game rules immoral, they cannot change them and must accept them. Therefore, unlike games in the real world, it is difficult to determine whether a player's action in a video game is truly voluntary. One should not simply condemn a player's action as immoral just because they performed what they consider an evil act; instead, one should further examine the player's attitude towards such immoral rules. Involuntary actions can cause players to step outside the game's "magic circle" and scrutinize the game rules themselves using real-world moral standards. As Deniz A. Kaya points out, when a player endorses an immoral game, it reflects their vice; when they criticize an immoral game, it reflects their virtue (Kaya, D. A., 2024). For example, if a player unknowingly enters a game containing "virtual pedophilia" content, we should not simply deem the player immoral. Instead, we should examine their attitude towards such rule settings: if they find the setting justified and enjoy it, they should be judged immoral; if they feel moral guilt and criticize the game, they should be judged virtuous (HUANG Y. F.,2024). In other words, when players have no intention to do evil within the game space, a virtuous player, forced to perform actions they consider immoral, should critique the game rules themselves, rather than merely consoling themselves with "it's just a game," thereby allowing themselves to do evil in the virtual space.

In summary, when evaluating "virtualized killing" in video games, the player's subjective motivation must be the primary consideration. Only when players fully accept the rules and do not bring desires they perceive as evil into the game space can real-world moral norms be suspended. Otherwise, actions within video games should still be constrained by real-world ethical norms.

3. Technology Dimension: The Impact of the Authenticity Gradient on Players

As argued earlier, a prerequisite for "virtualized killing" in video games to attain moral immunity is that players do not bring desires they perceive as "harmful" into the virtual world. Players must also recognize the difference between the virtual and real worlds to be certain they are not "harming others," forming a legitimate gaming attitude; otherwise, they cannot perform "virtualized killing" without harboring malicious desires. However, with technological advancements, both virtual reality (VR) and artificial intelligence (AI) are increasingly integrated into games. High-fidelity technology, through the virtualization and simulation of bodily perception, can indeed give players a sense of embodiment akin to the real world (SUO Y., YAN H. X. 2023), blurring the boundary between virtual space and reality. Even if players do not actively bring malicious desires into the game, within highly realistic virtual gaming spaces, it becomes difficult for players to be certain that their "killing" actions in the game do not involve any actual "harm." This blurring of boundaries stems primarily from two aspects:

Firstly, at the sensory level, the application of VR technology in video games affects players' cognition of "virtualized killing." Virtual characters in early video games often exhibited distinct non-realistic features. For instance, characters in pixel games like Super Mario Bros. (e.g., Goombas, Koopa Troopas) had simple outlines, and their "deaths" were represented by fragmentary disappearance. These visual symbols lacked specific lifelike characteristics: no complex limb movements, no facial expressions, and no physiological feedback, making it difficult for players to associate them with real-world phenomena. With advances in 3D modeling and physics engines, video games increasingly mimic the real world. "Virtualized killing" visually resembles real "death" more closely. For example, Grand Theft Auto V features detailed depictions of virtual characters; the details of skin tearing and expressions of pain can cause physical discomfort in some players. However, the screen barrier still allows players to clearly distinguish the virtual world from reality and reassure themselves it's "just a game," not experiencing immersive "virtual harm," thus avoiding significant aversion. VR technology, offering a comprehensive embodied experience, fundamentally breaks this sensory boundary. Eye-tracking ensures virtual scenes change with the player's perspective like the real world. Spatial audio enhances the player's sense of direction within the virtual space. Haptic feedback vests can even translate in-game stimuli into somatic sensations to some extent. Perceptually, VR technology disrupts the "player's cognitive boundary between the virtual and real worlds," making it impossible for players to articulate the difference between the "killing" they perform under VR and real-world killing. Consequently, they cannot form a gaming attitude devoid of malice, and "virtualized killing" thus fails to gain moral immunity.

Secondly, AI development also impacts players' definition of the "Other," causing them to question whether "virtualized killing" against AI-controlled characters truly causes no harm. NPCs in games before AI intervention could only offer pre-set, fixed reactions to player actions. Players viewed them merely as clusters of data, tools to achieve objectives or level up, experiencing no moral guilt for "killing" them. As Thomas Scanlon argued in What We Owe to Each Other, moral obligations arise from relationships of mutual responsibility among rational beings (Scanlon, T. M., 2000). In early game environments, NPCs lacked the key conditions to constitute an "Other": they were neither moral agents with rational capacity nor capable of intersubjective interaction with players. However, the introduction of deep learning and neural network technologies changed this. Today, NPCs can generate goal-oriented behaviors, exhibiting characteristics beyond mechanical programming. As Professor Zhai Zhenming pointed out: when a virtual entity's decision-making system possesses "counterfactual reasoning ability," its behavior transcends the mechanical nature of preset programs, exhibiting quasi-agentive intentional features (Zhai Z.M., 2003). When players observe NPCs dynamically adjusting interaction strategies based on environmental changes, showing "understanding" of virtual situations, players might perceive them as rational beings – a special kind of "Other." Therefore, when players regard NPCs as "Others," "killing" them ceases to be merely "defeat" and

involves harming an "Other," making it immoral. However, the question of whether these entities possess consciousness in the true sense remains unanswered. To date, those arguing virtual characters have consciousness cannot provide a definitive proof that "killing an AI-controlled virtual character in a video game involves concrete harm." Nevertheless, if a player believes these entities are rational moral agents, then indiscriminately "killing" them is immoral, even if other evaluators deem them incapable of being moral agents (Shen Q.Z., 2023). Within their cognitive system, "virtualized killing" of an "AI character" becomes indistinguishable from real-world "killing," impossible to perform without harboring malicious desire.

The highly realistic environment created by VR technology forces players to confront the ethical consequences of "killing" at the sensory level, even if rationally they know it's "fake" and "unreal." AI technology, conversely, causes players to rationally question whether virtual characters constitute another form of "life," and through sustained interaction, can even establish a mutually responsible moral relationship between virtual characters and players (LAN J.,2020). Thus, high-tech video games, by affording players experiences approaching real-world emotional resonance, create virtual spaces that are sensorially similar but essentially different, dissolving their gaming attributes. Within high-fidelity virtual gaming spaces, player behavior becomes more akin to "life" than play and should thus be constrained by the moral norms of the virtual world (Wang Bo, 2017). Although the specific content of these virtual world norms is unclear, and what "killing" a virtual character means remains contentious, it is evident from both player and technology dimensions that players find it harder to distinguish "virtualized killing" from "real killing" in highly realistic spaces. Situations where "virtualized killing" could previously be morally exempt due to its competitive nature become closer to real-world moral situations. For example, the devout Christian who could accept "killing enemies" in a traditional game might find the same act immoral in VR, doubting whether they are truly "killing" someone. This explains why many developers' direct porting of unmodified games to VR has drawn criticism: players' original "competitive cognition" of "virtualized killing" is replaced by the notion of "harming others," causing them to step outside the gaming attitude and the "magic circle," critically examining the "killing" tasks imposed by the rules as unreasonable. Therefore, the application of high-fidelity technology in video games must be approached with caution.

4. Design Dimension: Rule Design Reconstructing Player Cognition

For games, violating the rules of the game world is the greatest "immorality." When players perform "virtualized killing" by breaking the rules, the act is necessarily immoral. For instance, "killing" another player's character within a designated PvP arena, causing them to lose in-game property, is justified, whereas "virtualized killing" outside such boundaries faces moral scrutiny. In other words, game rules are not merely prerequisites for winning but also tools for moral cognition—they can endow virtualized killing with different moral attributes by redefining "legitimacy" and "harmfulness" within the virtual space. Therefore, to ensure the legitimacy of the game itself, developers must exclude immoral actions from the rule set and strive to prevent players' malice from entering the virtual space. This places significant responsibility on design, transforming it from a neutral activity into one imbued with ethical considerations (Norman, D. A., 2013). Responsible game designers must consider what kind of cognition their design fosters regarding "virtualized killing": whether it is "defeating an opponent" or "harming another person." If the former, "virtualized killing" remains amoral; if the latter, it becomes subject to moral scrutiny.

Firstly, in action game design centered on "virtualized killing," developers must clearly differentiate the virtual world from reality, reinforcing the player's cognition that "virtualized killing" equates to "defeating an opponent." A common strategy is designing reward and progression systems built around "killing" actions. Under this mechanism, players must complete killing tasks to earn experience points, rare items, or resources, thereby leveling up characters, unlocking new skills and equipment, and enhancing their virtual capabilities to tackle harder challenges. This system creates a positive feedback loop centered on "killing --- progression --- more effective killing." For mature players with a clear understanding of real-world rules, this system, contradicting the real-world norm that "harming others brings punishment," reinforces the cognitive boundary between virtual and real actions. Players are more likely to associate this in-game "virtualized killing" with competitive "defeating opponents" to gain loot, rather than with "harming others" which entails punishment and responsibility. However, for adolescent groups whose cognitive structures are not fully formed, prolonged immersion in such virtual rule systems, before establishing clear real-world boundaries, risks transferring the "unrealistic view of killing" from the virtual world into reality.

Furthermore, games reinforce the distinction between virtual and real worlds by limiting player freedom of action. This is often achieved through predefined ranges of player interaction, confining operations to specific rules. Donald Norman introduced the concept of "affordance" in The Design of Everyday Things, referring to the perceived and actual properties of an object that determine how it could possibly be used (Norman, D. A., 2013), emphasizing the actionable relationship between an individual and an object. Applied to game design, it becomes the "relational aspect concerning the possible actions between the game character and in-game objects (or the game world)." In most games, players can only attack or "kill" targets predefined as interactive; they cannot perform similar actions on non-designated objects. In other words, even if a virtual entity is, in principle, "non-respawning," as long as the game doesn't define it as a "killable target," the player cannot "eliminate" it. This mechanism inherently limits the player's scope of action within the virtual world, reinforcing the programmed and non-arbitrary nature of actions. For example, in the game Eternal Realm: Oracle of the Lost, when players are in the safe zone "Moonlight Sanctum," all attack skills deactivate, weapons are sheathed, characters adopt a peaceful stance, and any attempt to attack other players or NPCs is immediately prevented. In the "Crimson Wilds" zone, players can freely attack monsters for resources and engage in PvP combat, killing opponents to loot equipment and supplies (BIE W, 2018). Such controlled design strategies prevent players from performing "immoral acts" against non-combat objects through mechanics and cognitively define the context where "virtualized killing" should occur, ensuring internal consistency between player behavior and the game world's

rules.

Compared to the functional treatment of "virtualized killing" in action games, narrative-driven games often imbue it with moral meanings closer to reality. In the design philosophy of these games, killing is no longer merely a means to complete tasks or gain rewards; it is an act with ethical consequences, aimed at prompting players to reflect on real-life moral issues (LI M., LI S. ,2020). Therefore, in narrative games, player choices are not solely driven by "winning/losing" but focus on making moral judgments and bearing the consequences, which becomes a key part of the gaming experience.

When players gradually develop this ethical awareness, indiscriminate killing ceases to be a neutral strategic choice and becomes a violation of the game's internal rules. And according to design logic, any rule violation is immoral. The most direct way to achieve this design goal is to create concrete and vivid moral situations. (ZHONG Z. J.,2010) For instance, This War of Mine depicts wartime life scenarios through evocative visuals, highlighting the suffering of NPCs to trigger player empathy. Simultaneously, the fate of NPCs rests entirely in the player's hands; they might live happily due to the player's choices or die in war or suffer severe psychological trauma. This places a "moral responsibility" on the player within the virtual space. They begin to ponder whether stealing food from an elderly couple to survive is justified, rather than "killing enemies" without burden as in action games. In other words, in such games, even though NPCs may lack highly realistic human appearances or the subjectivity of digital life, the game establishes a connection between "virtualized killing" and "harming others" through its mechanics, embedding "bearing moral responsibility in the virtual world" as an implicit game rule (CHENG B. Q. ,2011). Players performing "killing" indiscriminately and without due consideration in the virtual space are, in essence, violating the rules—acting immorally. This does not mean all acts of "killing" to obtain resources in the game are immoral; even in the real world, we cannot simplistically deem such "killing" entirely immoral. Essentially, as long as players actively assume moral responsibility and carefully weigh the consequences of "virtualized killing," it is sufficient.

However, without direct sensory stimulation, fostering this cognition is challenging. The virtual game world is a constructed space; most players seeking enjoyment do not actively project their own ethical norms into it. Therefore, games must provide timely and clear feedback on different player actions, allowing players to understand the consequences of their behavior. For example, in BioShock, the essential resource ADAM for survival can only be obtained from NPCs ("Little Sisters"). The game explicitly informs players that these characters were once lively little girls, tragically captured and transformed into ADAM-harvesting zombies by the ruling powers. Players can choose to "Harvest" (kill them immediately for large amounts of ADAM) or "Rescue" (help them revert to normal humans, receiving only small amounts of ADAM). Clearly, designers intend this choice to prompt moral decisions, allowing players' moral will to influence the game world. However, the game fails to immediately show the consequences of these choices, only providing a moral assessment at the end. Players do not internalize this rule during gameplay, so their actions cannot be deemed immoral rule violations. This demonstrates that for "virtualized killing" to possess moral attributes within the virtual world, the following are necessary: coherent storytelling, knowledge collection and transfer, and specificity of technology (FENG Y. B., ZHANG W., WANG Q.,2025). Designers should ensure the virtual world's logic is coherent, discoverable, and fully understandable by players. Multiple feedback mechanisms should ensure players are confident about the impact and responsibility associated with each action.

Thus, game rule design is crucial for the moral evaluation of "virtualized killing." It can ensure the amorality of "virtualized killing" or compel players to reflect on and internalize real-world ethical norms within the virtual world. Depending on the game's purpose, rules must be appropriately set to shape player cognition, ensuring malicious desires remain outside the game's boundaries. However, since this shaping is inherently ambiguous, the standard for evaluating "virtualized killing" cannot rely solely on game genre; the player's subjective will should remain the core evaluative criterion.

In conclusion, the greatest difficulty in morally evaluating "virtualized killing" lies in the uncertainty of its consequences and harm. There is no conclusive evidence proving a necessary threat from "virtualized killing" to the real world, nor evidence that "killing" a virtual character causes substantive harm within the virtual world itself. Therefore, any moral evaluation must be motivation-based: whether "virtualized killing" contains a purpose that the player themselves perceives as evil. With the rapid development of technology and the game industry, player cognition within games is no longer an isolated choice of rational individuals but is dually influenced by technological mediation and game rules. Technological implementation shapes the player's emotional resonance and cognitive distance through sensory stimuli and interaction methods, affecting the embodied nature of moral judgment. Mechanism design shapes the player's moral decision-making framework through rules (rewards/punishments, freedom of interaction, narrative), guiding or constraining behavioral choices. Player subjectivity, formed through experiences across different games, leads to varied cognitions of "virtualized killing," thereby influencing its moral evaluation. This constitutes the "Player-Technology-Rule" triadic interactive framework, as illustrated below Table.1:

Table 1. The Player-Technology-Rule

Technology Authenticity	Rule Framework	Player Intent	Ethical Judgment
Low	Reward, Narrative	No Malice	Exempt
High	Reward, Narrative	No Malice	Contentious
High	None	No Malice	Moral
Any	Any	Malicious	Improper

That is, when players do not actively introduce desires they perceive as evil, higher technological fidelity in games and fewer guiding/constraining rules make the moral attributes of "virtualized killing" closer to real-world "killing." Players are more likely to lose their gaming attitude, unable to ensure their "virtualized killing" remains devoid of malicious desire, thus judging their own actions immoral. This imposes a requirement on developers and regulatory platforms to apply high-fidelity technology cautiously and design game rules to

guide player cognition, preventing them from falling into moral confusion. However, the core judgment of "virtualized killing" always lies with, and can only lie with, the individual player. Moral evaluations from a purely external spectator perspective are unreliable. This framework merely represents a possibility, as both technological environments and rule guidance can only influence, not determine, player cognition.

5. Summary

Players always enter the game space with real-world moral cognition. During gameplay, guided by the technological environment and rule settings, they form personalized "virtual moral norms" specific to that game, through which they morally scrutinize "virtualized killing." This process is essentially analogous to Aristotle's "practical wisdom" (phronesis). In real life, practical wisdom helps people "discern the true state, conditions, and demands of a particular situation (i.e., the truth of practice) so that they can adapt themselves and manifest 'true' ethical virtues" (Aristotle, 2007). In video games, games are also "a series of interesting choices" (Katherine, 2017). Players constantly face specific moral dilemmas distinct from the real world, making moral choices. These dilemmas can be intentionally set by developers or unintentionally caused by technological factors. Through the process of making choices, players receive different (in-game) material and emotional feedback, develop varied cognitions, and gradually form a set of moral concepts within the virtual gaming environment. Relying on these, they continuously understand the content of moral norms in specific moral situations, engage in careful moral reasoning, make choices they deem morally justified, and critique the game rules themselves. Therefore, within video games, players should first and foremost not engage in play with an evil motive; this is the premise of all moral evaluation. Secondly, players should maintain high moral sensitivity. They should not always use "it's just a game" as an excuse to deliberately negate the moral value of all actions within the virtual space. They should legitimately confront and process the new emotions and cognitions arising within the game space, choosing to perform actions they perceive as good when they have agency, and maintaining a critical stance towards the rules when forced to act. This self-examination of moral choices is not futile trouble-making; it is the only way to help players rediscover the most fundamental purpose of play – happiness.

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