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Daniel Conrad

Trinity University, dconrad@trinity.edu

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Videogame Play and the Ethics of Imagining

Daniel Conrad

A departmental senior thesis submitted to the Department of Philosophy at Trinity University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with departmental honors.

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Rachel Johnson
Thesis Advisor

Steven Luper
Department Chair

Michael Soto, AVPAA

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Videogame Play and the Ethics of Imagining

Many are interested in exploring whether playing certain videogames can be right or wrong, good or bad in a moral sense. Plenty of philosophers have taken some utilitarian or virtue-ethical stance on the matter, arguing from the consequences of playing potentially objectionable videogames toward conclusions about when playing such videogames is permissible, praiseworthy or — more frequently — blameworthy. Commonly, their arguments depend in some way or another on whether playing violent or otherwise objectionable videogames impacts one's moral character, players' disposition to act immorally in other regards and so forth.¹

Michael Goerger (2017) calls this the *contamination thesis*, according to which playing violent or otherwise objectionable videogames has a “direct and pernicious impact on real life behavior” (3).

The view is difficult to square with the available empirical research. It's not clear, for instance, that the measures of aggression used in psychological studies on players' behaviors can usefully indicate tendencies toward violence or other immoral behavior; further, aggressive tendencies observed under laboratory conditions aren't always mirrored in observed real-life scenarios (4). Besides the issues that these consequence-based approaches face, I think there's more to be said on the matter. Empirical considerations don't exhaust all that's at stake in the ethics of videogame play. I explore another avenue for the moral evaluation of videogame play, best illustrated through example.

Imagine Ethical Ellie, a morally upstanding person who sits down to play *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013) in private every now and then after returning home from work. Ellie has saved the game at a particular point in the narrative, one in which she controls the character of Trevor, a

¹ McCormick 2001, Waddington 2007, Coeckelbergh 2007 and Wonderly 2008 offer such views.

psychopathic criminal, as he tortures a kidnapped man in order to extract information from him. His victim is willing to talk from the get-go, but Trevor tortures him anyway, and players control him as he does so. The scene's satirical intentions are lost on Ellie, who just likes to play the scene. She chooses from the instruments of torture offered to her and takes delight in the realistic representation of gruesome, unnecessary violence, particularly enjoying the degree of control she has over the scene. At its conclusion, Ellie powers down the videogame before her save-state is overwritten so that she can play her favorite part of *Grand Theft Auto V* another day.

If you find this sort of behavior unsettling, you're in good company. Many share a pre-theoretical intuition that enjoying this sort of gameplay is wrong. But it's not immediately obvious why. If we asked Ellie about it, she might reply, "It's only a game! I'm just having fun." She's right: Trevor and the tortured man are merely fictional characters, so she isn't harming anyone else. It's not as if Ellie is playing with the aim to convince anyone that torture is enjoyable or permissible; she plays privately and doesn't encourage anyone else to do the same. Perhaps she's worried of what others would think, especially considering that she's an otherwise upstanding person. Ellie's only morally ambiguous behavior manifests in her penchant for this videogame's torture scene. And while an actual person might have grounds to object to representations of themselves as tortured or torturing, Trevor and his victim do not exist, nor are they depictions of any real person. There is no one to so object.

Despite all of this, Ellie seems to be doing something wrong — but it's not because her gameplay will make her act wrongly in the future, nor is it because she is encouraging others to do wrong or because she is delighting in an objectionable depiction of a real person. It may well be that certain videogame play can leave a mark on players' moral character, but here it seems

that there's something wrong about enjoying torture gameplay in itself, besides considerations of consequences or others' wishes.

I think this and similar cases of videogame play can be explained as wrong in terms of this feature of videogames: They are works of fiction, works of a kind intended to prompt imaginative activities, and playing videogames involves undergoing imaginings, typically for fun. I say that we are morally responsible for the imaginings that we choose to undergo and that we enjoy; it is my view that is wrong to enjoy imaginings when such enjoyment expresses attitudes, beliefs or values (hereafter simply 'attitudes') that we ought not hold. Once we've shown this, we'll be able to see how Ellie's enjoyment of this segment of *Grand Theft Auto V* expresses attitudes she shouldn't have, e.g. delight toward political torture.

I begin with a short discussion of imagination and fiction before returning to the case I've just presented. I compare it to thought experiments offered by Aaron Smuts (2013) and Berys Gaut (1998), each of whom presents arguments intended to demonstrate the intrinsic wrongness of enjoying imagining evil. Brandon Cooke's (2014) criticisms help us see where we can improve their accounts. With help from Stephanie Patridge's (2011) account of incorrigible social meaning, which describes how certain representations can carry connotations regardless of the intentions of their authors and audiences, I argue that when we imagine something as an instance of a kind, our imaginings can tell us what we think about all instances of that kind. Our imaginings can thereby express attitudes we hold toward real things; we are responsible for these attitudes, so when our imaginings express attitudes we shouldn't possess, we can appropriately be judged for possessing those attitudes. I conclude with a review of the limitations of my arguments and with suggestions for future research.

Imagining and fictions

It will suffice to make general remarks about imagining. My view doesn't rely on the details of any particular theory of imagining, and the considerations I raise should be translatable in terms of the theories available. To imagine is to entertain some proposition, experience or thing in your mind without committing, one way or the other, to the existence or truth of the proposition, experience or thing imagined. I might consider whether I had left the stove on this morning, or think of my ideal living situation, or wonder what it's like to be a famous movie star. These are intentional imaginings.

Not all imaginings are intentional actions. A catchy tune might come to me unbidden, and might even annoy me if I find myself unable to get it out of my head. Or I may drift into a daydream by accident. Plausibly, the dreams we have while sleeping comprise unintentional imaginings. This distinction is useful because we don't typically hold people responsible for things that happen to them or things that don't involve their approval or choice. Accidental imaginings aren't the proper objects of ethical evaluation. But if I sit down to deliberately daydream, I'm initiating and guiding myself through a series of imaginings. If any of our imaginings can be evaluated ethically, the imaginings that we choose to undergo can.

Imagining is a common experience. We imagine when we daydream; we imagine when we consider thought experiments; we imagine when we read a book or watch a movie. Broadly speaking, we imagine when we engage with any kind of fiction. Kendall Walton (1990) says that any time we engage with a fiction, we are playing a game of make-believe with it. On his view, works of fiction are 'props' for helping us imagine fictional worlds, the same way that toy cars, figurines and the like are props for children's games of make-believe (Walton 51). When we listen to a joke, read a book, or listen to and watch a film, the sentences, sounds and visual

phenomena of the work guide us through the fiction; we make-believe as if the sentences were true or as if what we are hearing and seeing were really happening. Sophisticated props, e.g. novels and videogames, help us deliberately undergo imaginings. (Daydreams, on the other hand, are propless fictions.)

Ethical concerns regarding the authorship of fictions overlap with those concerning our engagement with fictions. Authors are responsible for their intentions and motivations for creating fictional works. It seems wrong to make propagandistic fictions for the purpose of spreading misinformation, for instance, or to fictionally represent a real person in a way intended to unjustly besmirch their reputation. I'll bracket these sorts of issues and restrict my focus to what audiences, not authors, do when they engage with fictions.

With these minimal remarks on fictions and imaginings in mind, let's consider what some authors have suggested regarding the ethics of imagining.

Wrongful imaginings

Recall the case of Ethical Ellie, whose epithet seems inaccurate in light of her fondness for *Grand Theft Auto V*'s torture gameplay. Again, we have ruled out appeals to consequences and other relevant concerns. What seems to be wrong is just the fact that she enjoys imagining torture.

Some may immediately object to the idea that imaginings can ever be wrong. An opponent might say, "We know the difference between our imaginings and reality. Few get confused by the distinction! Ellie knows full well that the objects of her imaginings *aren't people*. No harm, no foul." Is it ever wrong, in itself, to undergo an imagining?

Aaron Smuts (2013) presents a thought experiment intended to convince us that it is bad, in itself, to enjoy imagining evil things. He has us consider a barren world that contains a lone person who is imagining pleasant thoughts about cats; consider a world that is similarly deserted, save for a survivor who spends his time imagining himself committing violence to children — children that did not, do not and will not exist (124–125). By way of moral intuition, Smuts says that the second world is worse in a moral sense, not because the person might harm anyone as a result or because the fantasies might incline him to harm others, but because the imaginings are evil in themselves. It's just bad to fantasize evil, says Smuts (126).

Smuts might be right, but his argument doesn't get him there. In relying solely on moral intuition, Smuts begs the question, insisting on its self-evident truth. But his conclusion isn't self-evident; competing accounts are on the table. An act-utilitarian would disagree, opting instead not to prefer one world over another so long as the fantasists derive equal amounts of pleasure from their imaginings. A non-moral explanation could explain the gut intuition, too: Perhaps I simply like cat fantasies, so I prefer the world in which cats are imagined. Maybe it's a mistake to confuse this aesthetic preference for a basic moral intuition. We should supply more persuasive reasons for taking a stance on this kind of case.

Berys Gaut (1998) offers another, similar argument. He says that we could imagine a man, imprisoned in solitary confinement for the rest of his years, who spends his time fantasizing about himself raping women — not women he has ever met, just imagined women. Gaut says that we can judge this man's imaginings to be morally reprehensible, not because he might realize his fantasies, but “for what and how he imagines, independently of how he acts or may act” (187).

When the rape fantasist imagines his fictional women, he is imagining them *as women*, that is, as beings of a kind that also has instances in the real world; and that he imagines them as women is,

of course, essential to his imaginative project. Thus, by virtue of adopting such an attitude toward his imagined women, he implicitly adopts that attitude toward their real-life counterparts — and so reveals something of his attitude toward real-life women. (Gaut 187–188)

Let's adjust the example to involve a man who imagines himself abusing children, and that his imagining them *as children*, a category that has instances in the real world, is essential to his imaginative project. This man is just like Smuts' imagined child torture fantasist: He enjoys directing himself through imaginings that involve him hurting kids in particular.

Unlike Smuts, Gaut offers a reason to believe that what this man imagines and how he responds to those imaginings — say, whether he enjoys them — is wrong. For Gaut, the imaginings about children that this man enjoys undergoing reveal what he thinks about *actual* children, not just the children in his mental life. On his view, the fantasist's pleasure in imagining harming children reveals an implicit approval of attitudes toward actual children, e.g. an attitude of delight toward their harm, or of approval toward child abuse, or of disregard toward human suffering. These are attitudes of which nobody should approve; it is morally wrong to do so.

It's worth noting that in interpreting Gaut, I've emphasized the prisoner's *enjoyment* of imagining himself committing evil. I think that the most charitable interpretation of Gaut would have him say that one can't enjoy such an imagining without having the corresponding bad attitude. This is distinct from saying that one can't, or wouldn't, imagine some evil without having an associated bad attitude, belief or value. If that were true, it would be impermissible to entertain imaginings of evil *tout court*, e.g. contemplating immoral states of affairs and thinking of what it would be like for someone to do wrong. I think few would find this view plausible; it imperils the enterprise of moral philosophy, for one. So let's say that, for Gaut, *enjoying* the

imagining is wrong because it reveals that the imaginer implicitly approves of an attitude that is wrong to approve of.

I agree with Gaut on this. One of the immoral things that the prisoner is doing is enjoying these imaginings because his enjoying them expresses his approval of objectionable attitudes regarding children and violence. (In the next section, I will say more about how our imaginings can express attitudes toward the actual counterparts of the objects of our imaginings; for now, let's grant the point.) But say that the prisoner feels guilty for enjoying these imaginings, perhaps because he knows that it would be wrong to approve of violence toward actual children.² Would this indicate that the prisoner *doesn't* approve of the attitudes expressed in his imaginings, say, violence toward children? Do we need to look for a different source of wrongness in his actions?

No, I don't think so. At best, the guilt indicates that he doesn't *wholeheartedly* approve of the enjoyment that he derives from his abuse fantasies. They don't repulse him to the point that he stops partaking in them, after all. Approving, in any degree, of an attitude of which nobody should approve is wrong; even if you don't like that you approve of such attitudes, it's wrong to do so. The child abuse fantasist approves of the attitudes of actual child abusers, attitudes that take actual children as their objects.

You might think all of this is on the wrong track, though, if you believe that our attitudes about the objects of our imaginings can't express what we think of those things' actual counterparts. In a reply to Gaut's view, Brandon Cooke (2014) makes this claim. He says that adopting an attitude toward the objects of our imaginings is not an implicit adoption of the same attitude toward the real-world instances of those objects; when our attitudes toward fictional

² One can entertain an attitude without having an attitude of approval toward it. In fact, it is common to entertain an attitude that one disapproves of. The claim that possessing an attitude requires an attitude of approval toward that attitude would imply an infinite regress. If you possessed an attitude of approval toward that attitude, you'd need an attitude of approval toward *that* attitude of approval, *ad infinitum*.

entities do reflect our attitudes toward real ones, he says, it is only because the author intended that those representations refer to real entities:

Shifting our focus to artworks, it is true that some works prompt certain attitudes within fictive imaginings and also encourage similar attitudes toward the real-world counterparts of those imaginings. But this is not always the case. Recall that generating a fictive utterance involves the intention that the audience disengage the standard [epistemic] speech act commitments, so in the default case, such an utterance does not refer to real-world entities. Many fictions do, of course, also make reference to things in the world (for example, a satire with animal characters that an informed audience would recognize as also commenting on contemporary politicians; a fairy tale intended also to serve as racist propaganda). But this feature of a fiction is dependent on distinct intentions of the fiction's author and not on the utterance *tout court*, since fictions do not make reference to the world merely by prescribing fictive imaginings. Determining whether a fiction works in such a multilayered way is a matter of making inferences about the author's intentions. In cases such as fantasy, the author and audience are typically the same person, but the foregoing remarks still apply. From the mere fact that a person fantasizes about *x*, we cannot conclude that the person actually desires *x* or approves of it. Working that out requires us to know other facts about the person's mental life. (Cooke 320–321)

Because imagining entails so few commitments toward the veracity of the objects of our imaginings, Cooke says, imagining reveals little about our thoughts about the things we're imagining. In a sense, he has to be right; nobody has opinions that are truth-apt, in the ordinary sense of being true or false by virtue of how the world is, about merely fictional things.

At the same time, I'm not sure that this is the most responsive rebuttal to Gaut's argument. Gaut is saying that holding a bad attitude is constitutive to *enjoying* imaginings of evil. You can't enjoy the imagining without possessing the attitude you ought not hold; the latter is necessary for the former. And Gaut says that imaginings are wrong when they depend on, and thereby express, the endorsement of wrongful attitudes. Cooke says that imaginings themselves don't constitutively contain objectionable attitudes, but he says that they can cause them. For Cooke, imaginings and their prompting are derivatively wrong when they encourage the adoption of attitudes that no one should hold, because such encouragement is wrong in itself (323).

Cooke is right to say that it's wrong to encourage others to adopt immoral attitudes even if you're unsuccessful in so convincing them. But he can't be right in saying that an imagining is only wrong when it works to encourage others to adopt the wrong attitudes and beliefs. For one, this can't explain the intuition we're trying to account for. In the case of Ethical Ellie, we think she's done wrong even though nothing about her actions encourage others to enjoy imagining realistic depictions of torture.

For another, he too quickly rules out the possibility that the imaginings we enjoy undergoing can express the attitudes we have toward the real instances of the kinds of things we imagine about. So we should look to see how bad attitudes can manifest in our imaginings and how our imaginings can express our attitudes toward the actual counterparts of what we imagine about.

Attitudes in imaginings

Let's work backward from Cooke's claim that imagining about fictions doesn't involve reference to real-world entities. I think Cooke is saying that because imaginings involve fictitious entities, or fictional versions of real things, they do not display or express our attitudes toward anything real. Our imaginings, he says, are only 'about' the fictitious entities that are the objects of our imaginings.

I don't think this is how imaginative reference works. Even if an imaginer does not intend for their imaginings to correspond to any real-world counterpart, they still express the imaginer's attitudes and beliefs about the sort of thing they're imagining — and because they're about that sort of thing, they express what we think of the real instances of that kind of thing. When we imagine something as an instance of some kind, our reactions to those imaginings do express our

attitudes about that kind and its instances, because we are imagining about *that kind of thing* in particular.

For instance, when I imagine a baseball bat, it appears to my mind's eye as a long, largely cylindrical piece of wood or metal that is meant to hit baseballs. When I imagine about a game of baseball, baseball bats appear this way and are used to that end. Because I intend to depict a baseball bat in my imaginings involving them, those imaginings reveal my beliefs about what baseball bats are.

Consider Bill, who knows little about baseball and baseball bats, but does know the function of baseball bats in the game, namely that they're used to hit baseballs. Let's say that in Bill's imaginings about baseball, players swing small, winged creatures at baseballs. When his imaginings feature baseball, he does intend to imagine baseball bats, and those imaginings reveal his conception of what baseball bats are: small, winged creatures that are used to hit baseballs, poor things.

Crucially, these imaginings aren't about any particular baseball bat, but they are about the kind of thing that baseball bats are. They show what Bill thinks about *any* baseball bat. And his imaginings show the position he takes on the properties of actual instances of baseball bats, too. If we asked Bill to pick out a baseball bat, then stood him in front of a long, largely cylindrical piece of wood and a small, winged creature, he'd point to the latter. When we imagine something *as* an instance of a kind, those imaginings are sensitive to our conception of that kind — of what we think its instances are like in general, including how they are to be treated or interacted with.

(Clearly Bill has an incorrect conception of baseball bats. What matters, I think, is that he *intends* to conceive of a baseball bat when he describes what he thinks a baseball bat is, includes them in his imaginings, or tries to point to one in real life.³)

In the modified version of Gaut's case, the prisoner takes pleasure in imagining the torture of children, and it's central to his imaginative project that he is imagining his victims as children. This doesn't reveal his attitudes toward any *particular*, actual child, but it shows what he thinks of children in general — specifically, that *any* child is an instance of a kind that has no right to physical well-being, say, or whose rights are superseded by the prisoner's sadistic desires, or that can permissibly be harmed. The prisoner doesn't need to tell us his opinions about children for us to know that his attitudes about children are immoral. Armed with a description of his preferred daydreams, we know that he holds attitudes that he shouldn't. The same goes for Ellie and her penchant for imagined political torture.

Gaut's prisoner might deny that he's imagining children as we know them in the world. He could object, saying that he's not intending to depict children in his imaginings; rather he harms *children-prime*, a fictitious variant on children, in his imaginings. "Heavens, no! I'm not imagining *children*, or they're not *really* children. The objects of *my* imaginings are things of the sort that have neither experiences nor rights to be deprived of. They only act *as if* they're in pain and all, and that's what I like to see in my mind's eye. Torturing children? Reprehensible!" It may be wrong to hold certain attitudes toward children, but maybe not toward children-prime.

Does the prisoner's move work? I think his line of reasoning seems weaselly, not persuasive. Here's why: Our conceptions of things aren't constructed alone, in a vacuum. To a significant

³ Plausibly, you need to have enough of the correct concept in order for your imagining to be about the thing in the world; if you're too wrong about what a baseball bat is, then perhaps you're really imagining something else. Let's say that knowing the function of baseball bats suffices.

degree, at least some of them are socially constructed, constrained by the reality of our social contexts. So the range of possible interpretations of certain representations — even representations we present only to ourselves, as in our daydreams — is limited by the meanings that ‘stick’ to those representations.

Stephanie Patridge (2011) details one way that this can happen: Some representations have “an incorrigible social meaning that raises the moral stakes and opens the door to associated character assessments” (307). Though our imagined representations are epistemically flexible — they might involve a real person that we know acting contrary to how we know they would, for instance — they aren’t epistemically open, or altogether untethered from reality. Social facts constrain the range of possible interpretations that anyone properly familiar with the concepts could glean from the representation.

Patridge takes the example of a political cartoon that depicts Barack Obama eating a watermelon. Such a representation of Obama carries racist implications for (at least) U.S. audiences due to the nation’s history of racism, slavery, and the association of such imagery with the dehumanization of black Americans. Anyone familiar with the relevant facts about contemporary American culture and U.S. history cannot deny the cartoon’s racist connotations.⁴ Someone might be scolded for enjoying a representation like this and then reply, “But it’s only a cartoon.” The reply misses the point; appeals to the representation’s status as fictional fail to recognize the *incorrigible* social meaning of the imagery. Patridge says that it is a failure of character to be insensitive to this failure to see its social meaning as incorrigible:

⁴ Patridge does recognize the epistemic flexibility of even this kind of representation, though: “Just about any successful alteration of the meaning of Obama eating watermelon in the United States will be one that uses this kind of racist trope to make a distinctly anti-racist message” (308). All we need is this: Any interpretation of this imagery is conditioned by its racist baggage.

Such a failure is a failure of both sensitivity and of sympathy—sensitivity to the social meaning of the imagery, and sympathy with those who are the targets of such imagery. Sympathy requires us to inhabit the perspective of others, and to fail to see these representations as targeting others is to fail to adequately exhibit a properly sympathetic response in relation to a feature of current life that especially calls for sympathy; in this case, oppression. ... To insist that one's imagination is one's own private affair, detached from one's own actual commitments and similarly detached from the contextual moral facts on the ground, amounts minimally, in this case, to a thumbing of one's nose at a requirement of solidarity with the victims of oppression. This is an obvious vice of character. ... Such a lack of sensitivity might be a failure to see the relationship between the game's representation of members of an oppressed class and the actual oppression of such individuals, or it might be a failure to see such a connection as a reason to avoid enjoying such a representation." (Patridge 310)

Note that Patridge is not saying that it would be an expression of racist attitudes to enjoy the representation of Obama eating watermelon. She is only arguing that the failure to see the representation's social meaning as incorrigible is a moral failing in itself.

But I think Patridge's account here can help combat appeals like the prisoner's claim to be expressing attitudes about children-prime, not children. His imaginings involve an incorrigible link between the depictions of violence against children — or even children-like representations — and the reality of child abuse. Anyone aware of the relevant social facts would agree that these imaginings bring the usual connotations with them: The prisoner can't imagine himself committing violence against 'children-prime' without those imaginings involving tacit attitudes of approval toward, for instance, child abuse. The imagined situation is loaded with social meaning that cannot be waved away with appeals to the situation's fictitiousness.

Gaut's prisoner and Ethical Ellie are guilty of the same kind of wrongs. Gaut's prisoner delights in his imaginings, which cannot be divorced from the real evils they recall and to which they refer, so they express his possession of attitudes nobody should hold. Our intuition regarding Ellie's behavior can be explained this way, too. Political torture is a grim reality. Her enjoying *Grand Theft Auto V*'s depiction of it for pleasure's sake is disconcerting because that's

not the right attitude someone ought to have toward the subject. In both cases, the imaginer ought to know better; they should recognize the incorrigible social meaning of the representations that they're enjoying. The attitudes expressed in those imaginings and engagements with fictions are attitudes that nobody ought to have.

Concluding remarks and the limits of my argument

This meditation on the ethics of imagining offered insights on the ethics of enjoying fictions in general; videogames, like other works of fiction, are essentially sophisticated props for games of make-believe, like those games we play with books, daydreams, films, jokes, and theatrical productions. The pertinent question is: When is it right or wrong to engage in certain imaginings? I have argued that it is wrong when our enjoyment expresses attitudes, beliefs or values that we shouldn't hold. Before resting my case, I should review the limits of my arguments.

First, as far as videogames are concerned, the foregoing arguments apply only to those cases involving single-player videogames that are fictions; I have excluded cases involving multiplayer gameplay or nonfiction videogames.⁵ It seems fairly uncontroversial to say that we can wrong one another in the course of playing videogames with other people, e.g. through poor sporting etiquette, and that we can do actual wrong to others via virtual means. I also excluded considerations of nonfictional videogames, or videogames that aspire to accurately portray real-world events or figures; it seems plausible that such nonfiction works involve special obligations

⁵ Nonfictional videogames might be biographical, documentary or educational, or they might otherwise purport to accurately describe reality. For instance, *That Dragon, Cancer* is an autobiographical videogame created by Ryan and Amy Green, who lost their son to terminal cancer at the age of four years; the videogame memorializes him and shares their tale of hardship and perseverance with players. Engagement with this sort of game will involve different, morally relevant considerations than do the typical cases of videogame play.

and responsibilities regarding how authors depict their subjects and how audiences are to engage with these works, but these matters are ultimately outside the scope of this paper. Besides, videogames are typically works of fiction, so I take the paradigmatic case of potentially problematic videogame play to involve merely fictional characters and events. Our conclusions about ‘videogames’ should be taken to be conclusions about playing single-player videogames that are works of fiction.

Further, there is one sort of case that worries me about my conclusion. Our intuition about cases like Gaut’s and Ellie’s might clash with another common case. People commonly watch TV shows, for instance *Breaking Bad* or *Game of Thrones*, that feature depictions of horrific things, even actions and events with incorrigible social meanings: murder, rape, suicide and more. Usually we watch these shows for pleasure, because we enjoy them, and this seems benign. If this counts as enjoying imagining the wrong sort of thing, though, then this seems to serve as a strong counterexample to the intuition that motivates my view. Maybe the mere fact that you’re enjoying the fictional portrayal of something is not enough to show that you possess a bad attitude you shouldn’t be holding.

An admission of guilt: I began by using cases of daydreaming and videogame play because they involve imaginings about oneself and therefore are easier to establish as wrongful than are cases that involve imaginings about others, like those audiences undergo when watching *Breaking Bad*.⁶ When I watch *Breaking Bad*, I don’t imagine myself as the criminal protagonists, Walter White or Jesse Pinkman, who betray others, kill, manufacture drugs, steal and so forth.

⁶ Robson and Meskin (2016) argue that videogames are *self-involving interactive fictions*, “fictions that, in virtue of their interactive nature, are about those who consume them” (165). Take, for instance, to the language players use when talking about videogame play: First- and second-person statements like “I dodged the attack” or “You shot the enemy” are common and reflect the way players engage with these works, i.e. how we imagine ourselves, in some sense, as doing what we make our on-screen avatar does.

To watch *Breaking Bad* is to imagine that those fictional characters, not myself, are doing those things; if I were imagining them of myself, I wouldn't be watching *Breaking Bad*, but using it as a prop in some other Waltonian game of make-believe.

As Cooke points out, it's wrong to enjoy these kinds of representations when doing so acts to encourage acting out or approving of such behaviors in either oneself or others. It's wrong to enjoy racist jokes, for instance, because they are meant to elicit enjoyment in the adoption or recognition of racist attitudes and beliefs. If a film ultimately, if subtly, endorsed racism, then it'd be wrong to set out to watch the film for purposes of enjoyment. Additionally, there may be a case for establishing that obsessive or neurotic fascination with even well-intentioned stories, stories that nonetheless involve depictions of (say) rape or torture, can exhibit attitudes that one should not hold. But making that case is not my goal here.

I end with this: Enjoying representations in fictions about others' misdeeds is a distinct activity from enjoying fantasies about oneself doing so. Whether there's a morally significant distinction, however, is a question I leave open. It does seem as if imagining others' terrible actions does not involve our taking a position on those things, or as if our own imagined actions more easily reflect our beliefs about the real-life counterparts of the objects of our imaginings. But what makes the difference between enjoying a torture scene in *Game of Thrones* and Ellie's enjoyment of the torture scene in *Grand Theft Auto V*? The answer will help to clarify the relationship between our enjoyment of imaginings and the attitudes we hold toward the contents of our imaginings.

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