



Think Tank

‘Experiencing and Teaching Ethical Problems’

-Short summary of the discussion-

Organised by the UCL Centre for Ethics and Law,
in collaboration with UCL Computer Science,
on 20th March 2013.

From role-playing, into virtual reality

Virtual reality is a means of simulating a situation. However, it is not the only way in which we simulate events. When we role-play a situation as students, when continuing our training as professionals, or even as actors in a play, we are simulating that situation. Virtual reality allows participants to stop playing roles themselves. Technology creates the situation; individuals never need pretend. They are who they are, inserted into situations we cannot, or may not wish to, achieve in reality.

This simulated reality has the capacity to have powerful effects on those who experience it. Whilst cognitively we may be aware of the artificiality of what we perceive in virtual environments, it is common to experience both physiological and emotional responses that at the very least approximate those that would be felt in response to reality.¹

Continuing developments in technology allow more people to experience virtual environments, at ever-reducing cost. At the same time, improvements in both software and hardware mean these environments can be made increasingly complex and nuanced. As the sophistication and availability of virtual reality technology increases, so too does awareness of its possible uses as a tool for research, training, and assessment.²

Training ethics by simulating the unfamiliar

The training value of virtual reality environments might be most apparent in relation to those ethical problems that are not easily experienced. Pilots prepare for emergency situations by simulating them, so that they can practice and prepare without the dangers

¹ “For instance, Slater et al.’s study on the VR equivalent of obedience experiments (Slater et al., 2006) has shown that despite the fact that participants knew that the scenario was not real, many of them were stressed by the requirement to inflict electric shocks on a virtual woman and some of them even withdrew early from the experiment.” (Xueni Pan and Mel Slater, “Confronting a Moral Dilemma in Virtual Reality: A Pilot Study,” in *Proceedings of the 25th BCS Conference on Human-Computer Interaction* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, United Kingdom: British Computer Society, 2011).

² Xueni Pan, Domna Banakou, and Mel Slater, “Computer Based Video and Virtual Environments in the Study of the Role of Emotions in Moral Behavior,” in *Affective Computing and Intelligent Interaction*, ed. Sidney D’Mello, et al., *Lecture Notes in Computer Science* (Springer Berlin Heidelberg, 2011).

of reality. Landing a plane with only one engine is difficult, but so too is making an ethical decision.

Many problems are not ordinary ethical problems, but that is precisely what makes them so difficult to respond to when they do arise. Those in business, or in professional roles such as lawyers or doctors, must be ready to face such challenges. Against this background, there may be value in familiarity, though it is important to be clear what this value is.

It is not necessarily the case that experiencing the same ethical challenge more than once will make us better at responding to it. Pilots improve their reactions to malfunctioning engines by practicing their responses, achieving an objectively better capacity to respond. The same cannot necessarily be said of our ethical decision-making.

One of the potential downfalls of using virtual environments to train in ethics is that it can make the unfamiliar overly familiar. There is perhaps value to our gut responses, those that are not rehearsed. If we are too comfortable in ethically challenging situations, we risk responding not with awareness, but out of habit: "If one becomes so very good, even especially good, at addressing moral problems, the moral problems themselves become less problematic; that is, they become routine and present no particular challenge. The clinical ethicist at that point responds by rote, that is, to use Dewey's terminology, the ethicist responds habitually [...] We must be uncomfortable, troubled, pained or disturbed by the current state of affairs in order to truly inquire."³

Now, the decisions we make in ethically challenging situations are not always the choices that, in hindsight, we would like to have made. We will find ourselves affected by implicit biases we would have preferred to avoid, or perhaps even incapable of forming any response at all: frozen by unfamiliarity. By simulating the making of these decisions, virtual reality offers the opportunity to reflect. In allowing us to consider what we would prefer to have done, virtual environments can offer ethical training that does not impose its own answers. Instead, it provides us with the opportunity to reflect upon any discrepancy between our stated ethical principles and our actual behaviour.

Virtually experiencing complex consequences

Not every effect of our choices is easy to recognise, or to understand. Particularly in business contexts, the consequences of the decisions made can extend to others who are distant in time, space, or both. Virtual environments can bring immediacy to our experience of the possible consequences of our decisions. In demonstrating effects in a virtual world, it can heighten our sense of the ethical consequences of what we do in the real world, and make us stop and think before acting. Virtual reality can improve our perceptive (and therefore ethical awareness) in complex situations.

There is a need, though, to ensure that we recreate the full complexity of the situations we aim to simulate. Virtual environments, by sometimes reducing problems to isolated, sometimes binary decisions, can remove the multitude of factors that press upon us

³ Kim Garchar, "Imperfection, Practice and Humility in Clinical Ethics," *Journal of Evaluation in Clinical Practice* 18, no. 5 (2012).

when we try to make decisions. The environmental noise that surrounds ethical decision-making must be preserved.

Implementing the virtual to train ethics

Through role-play and discussion we can consider our ethical decision-making in great detail. The addition of technology, however, adds immediacy and dynamism whilst reducing awareness of pretence. It can also be a cost-effective and efficient means of training large numbers of people in the same way, offering particular usefulness to professional bodies and large businesses.

What is crucial, however, is the maintenance of real-world interaction subsequent to our virtual experiences. If the value of virtual reality is in reflection and consideration, then there needs to be space to do this: to discuss and debate options and alternatives. Virtual environments should not isolate individuals, and should not be used in isolation. New technology should be used in conjunction with the old. Virtual reality should not seek to improve us, but instead allow us the tools to improve ourselves.

Further reading

- Garchar, Kim. "[Imperfection, Practice and Humility in Clinical Ethics.](#)" *Journal of Evaluation in Clinical Practice* 18, no. 5 (2012): 1051-56.
- Pan, Xueni, Domna Banakou, and Mel Slater. "[Computer Based Video and Virtual Environments in the Study of the Role of Emotions in Moral Behavior.](#)" Chap. 6 In *Affective Computing and Intelligent Interaction*, edited by Sidney D'Mello, Arthur Graesser, Björn Schuller and Jean-Claude Martin. Lecture Notes in Computer Science, 52-61: Springer Berlin Heidelberg, 2011.
- Pan, Xueni, and Mel Slater. "[Confronting a Moral Dilemma in Virtual Reality: A Pilot Study.](#)" In *Proceedings of the 25th BCS Conference on Human-Computer Interaction*, 46-51. Newcastle-upon-Tyne, United Kingdom: British Computer Society, 2011.