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I Smash the Body Electric: An Ethic of Digital Impact

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ABSTRACT
This paper examines questions of digital autonomy from a humanist perspective. Drawing from the humanist tenet that transcendental ethical systems serve to defer personal ethics, this paper examines the ways in which game mediation undermines player autonomy, and the extent to which "destructibility" affects game spaces. Presenting a brief history of "destructibility" in games, and comparing the ramifications of "destructible" and "non-destructible" spaces, this paper argues that digital humanism requires a reassessment of virtual behavior, and a conscious move towards unmediated and unmoderated spaces, in order to draw considerations of ethics back to the individual.

Categories and Subject Descriptors
K.4.1 [**Computers and Society**]: Public Policy Issues –*Ethics, Regulation, Use/abuse of power.*

General Terms
Performance, Design, Human Factors, Theory,

Keywords
Destructibility, Digital Bodies, Ethics, Humanism, Mediation, Moderation

1. INTRODUCTION
Humanist ethics are founded upon a simple insight into the world: That we, and we alone, are ultimately responsible for our actions. While in a secular society, this thought might seem common, even commonplace, it is one that carries immense ramifications. To the humanist, then, any system that co-opts this ethical process is bound to be incomplete. Again and again, in the breadth of humanist scholarship, we find this assertion made clear: Paul Kurtz, called the "modern father of secular humanism," wrote in his *Euphraxophy* that a good life lived alone was insufficient – for Kurtz, humanism is explicitly sociocultural, a responsibility to our practice of a social ethic [47]. 1 Among Enlightenment writers, Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*, soundly rejects transcendental ethical models, firmly stating that the crux of morality lies nowhere but within us [270]. Even a writer as early as Epicurus of the Greeks concludes that any god who demands much but enforces nothing deserves only to be ignored [23].

How then, does this tradition of thought respond to new social spheres such as the Internet, and new transcendental ethical proscriptions? What are the challenges of digital humanism? To understand the degree to which our actions have tangible consequence in these spaces, we enter the realm of the "destructible" – the construction of environments and bodies that may be virtually impacted. In this paper I will be examining the practical movement of "destructibility" from actual into virtual terms, following the metaphoric gameplay notion of destruction from actual play spaces to virtual ones. I will consider the changes that occur when these fields of "destructibility" expand to include bodies as well, and the inevitable problems that arise when game-spaces play host to the breadth of social online interaction – suddenly becoming something more than play, and something more than a game. Using the digital theory of Hervé Fischer, as well as the play theory of Sutton-Smith, I will be exploring notions of bodies, especially digital bodies, at play.

Ultimately the questions asked become ethical ones, hinging on new understandings of our relationship between private and social experiences in new environments. In light of questions of control, pitting person-based moderation versus system-based mediation, I will be turning to the tradition of humanist thought to engage these new social considerations. Since humanist ethics stand fundamentally opposed to transcendental ethical prescriptions of any sort, they allow us a unique insight into these new spaces. According to this path of thought, it is up to us to respond to the challenges of these new spaces, by choosing to pursue digital spaces that are unmoderated and unmediated – spaces in which we can be free.

2. DEATH AND THE GAMER
The first perfectly destructible game environment can be found in Namco's 1982 title *Dig Dug*. The player controls a little man with a drill, who must dig deep into the ground to rout various creatures. The entire map can be mined in this way, and the monsters themselves can be inflated and popped. In a final flourish, there are also occasional rocks that a player may dislodge, which cave-in, possibly crushing the digger himself. But while *Dig Dug* typifies the most basic premise of "digital destruction," the term "destructible" didn't come into common usage until a decade later. Popularized by turn-based artillery games such as *Tank Wars, Scorched Earth, Gorilla* and *Worms*, the term has come to mean any object, usually terrain, which may be affected through the act of play. There are "destructible" first-person shooters such as *Red Faction* and *Crysis*, and puzzle games such as *Mr. Driller* that elaborate upon navigating a purely-destructible space.

Much of this advancement in affectable spaces in games has been due to advancement in the programming upon which these games rely. The "Havoc Engine," a software development kit released in

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2000, allows for a range of real-time interaction between characters and objects, through functional gravity models and ragdoll physics. Currently havoc products are used in a range of over 150 titles across seven game consoles, games which include *Fallout 3*, *Super Smash Bros. Brawl*, and *Second Life*. With this prevalence of interactable and impactable worlds, it would seem that now more than ever, players are in for a smashing good time.

This digital occupation with destruction is, of course, nothing new. Sutton-Smith, reminds us, in his *Rhetoric of Power*, that as long as humans have been at play, our fantasies have involved destruction. Every time a rook takes a queen, or a battleship is sunk, this central metaphor is reasserted: To win is to live, and to lose is to die [72]. Through this rubric, we can understand the metaphoric notion of "destructibility" in starker terms. It can inform the visual language and navigable experience of a game-space, dividing objects you can affect from those that you cannot, and providing a range of play experience ranging from the invulnerable to the fragile. Because of this, we can quickly see that notions of destructibility that pertain only to terrain are bound to be incomplete. It is not precisely that we may affect game-space in these scenarios, but that we play characters that are capable or incapable of this range of affect. What seems a condition of space reflexively becomes a condition of the self. That is, in the act of play, we do not objectively experience a terrain's capacity to be destroyed, but our own subjective capacity to destroy.

Such systemic contortions may lead one to a type of digital formalism, in which it is assumed that with every digital space come the tools sufficient to understand and navigate it. In this scenario, there is no need for introspection and no value in extra-systemic analysis: Why bother, if, to borrow from Leibniz, we inhabit "the best of all possible virtual worlds?" But it is exactly this line of thinking that Fischer warns against in his *Digital Shock*. It is not just that formalist notions comprise a compelling myth of the virtual. They also lend themselves to utopian notions of what can, and cannot be mediated [34]. There is the idea that mediation can create game-spaces in which a full range of action is possible. Thus games, in their design, may present intact worlds, but not complete ones. Just as the metaphor of destructibility ostensibly shapes space but ultimately shapes body, any attempt to understand such systems formally falls victim to the same tautology: The idea that one can "mediate" a perfectly ethical space is doubtful – these sorts of mediations fundamentally shape the experience of play, and serve to defer ethics.

3. WE'RE SORRY, BUT YOUR PRINCIPLES ARE IN ANOTHER CASTLE

Since interactions in virtual spaces are fundamentally mediated ones, relying in part on the parameters of digital mediation, any configuration of virtual body and space may be said to inform behavior [323]. With no delineation between "rules of the game," and "rules of the world," these informed behaviors are not simply ludic ones, but operate as codified social schema. These social codes are often formal and absolutist, configuring all allowed action to fall within the field of possible behavior. Ethics, then, become systematized in relation to physically operative function – that is, if I can do it, then I may do it.

It is through these configurations that games such as *Grand Theft Auto*, a sandbox design of "destructibility" informs player behavior fundamentally more than any other theme or game narrative. Compare this model to one found in *Crazy Taxi*, a superficially-similar game without a destructible environment. In *Crazy Taxi*, the player drives a cab through a city, taking all manner of shortcuts in order to arrive at destinations as quickly as possible. You exist in a prolonged state of recklessness, but one that cannot end in harm – pedestrians scamper out of the way, no matter how brazenly you hog the road… or sidewalk. Occasionally when a passenger jumps in, she or he will exclaim "Watch it, you nearly killed me!" which sums the game up well. The thrill of *Crazy Taxi* comes from the knowledge that you cannot harm those around you.

In *Grand Theft Auto*, the thrill comes from knowing that you can. Pedestrians with whom you collide are battered or killed outright. Cars reel from impact, degrading from pristine models to smoldering hulks after a minute's worth of punishment – in a final flourish, these vehicles will explode after a few moments, consummating destruction with self-destruction. Just as it is impossible to harm your fares in *Crazy Taxi*, it is likewise impossible to navigate *Grand Theft Auto* without harming those around you – say, by settling out of a life of crime and getting a calm, peaceful job driving a taxi. By making it possible to harm non-player characters around you – in fact, by making it impossible to avoid harming them – game design systematizes its own form of redacted gospel: in this case, "Thou Shalt Kill."

But both the bumper-car cartoon physics of *Crazy Taxi* and the nihilistic ragdoll world of *Grand Theft Auto* remain internally consistent. Each propose a navigable world in which all range of possible actions is permissible, bound by the formalized function of impactable play range. In these very-different games, to borrow from Marshal McLuhan, the mediation is the message. In defining both play experience and play behavior, all ethical consideration is deferred, placing the onus of morality firmly outside the game's parameters. Thus the decision whether or not to misbehave in *Grand Theft Auto* becomes meaningless – the only consideration of value is whether or not one wishes to play this sort of game at all.

Of course, it bears repeating that these formal ethical systems, while incomplete, are sufficient in context. Both games I have mentioned are single-player, and all supposed virtual harm fits with the metaphoric abstraction of play. We are responsible only to ourselves for whatever fantasies we indulge in such spaces, removed as we are from social responsibility. But it is when these game systems, with their formally mediated systems, begin to be applied to interplayer experiences that this amoral ludics comes to be problematic. It is a half-world: one in which you may encounter instances of behavior that seem playful but are serious, those that seem virtual, but are real. And it is in these situations that the ethical dilemma of online digital interaction becomes a profoundly humanist one.

4. THE DIGITAL HUMANE

The first, and perhaps most misleading misunderstanding of virtual interaction is that it is "unreal" in any significant sense. That "virtualized" actions are not actual often relegates them to the camp of fiction: they are called illusory, dreamlike, and ultimately fake. But to any harboring doubts that virtual behavior can have actual consequence may consult Julian Dibbell's *A Rape in Cyberspace,* in which he provides the first account of an act of virtualized sexual violence. While socializing on an early multi-user dungeon, a hybrid of a text-based game and chatroom, one

maliciously-minded player executed a script to make it seem that other characters were behaving in ways they had no control over. Taking advantage of this position of control, he proceeded to enact a graphic sexual assault on a couple of female players [7].

Is it any surprise that these women felt the impact of such an action? In Dibbell's account, one describes how she had posttraumatic tears running down her face, having been humiliated and degraded in front of her peers. This event, known as the LambdaMOO incident for the multi-user dungeon in which it took place, notably highlights the ambiguities of such online interactions in three ways: It occurred within a game-space not solely dedicated to conventional "play," and it occurred through an exploitation of the very formalist boundaries meant to render such actions impossible: The rules of the game.

If the central rule in designing multi-user dungeons is that every player can control his or her own action, then an assault against a player's autonomy is one against their very self. It becomes, then, a case of impactable bodies: Normally individuals in LambdaMOO operated according to *Crazy Taxi* rules: no matter what they typed, each retained their own physical authority. To take a phrase from Vonnegut, they "might as well have been throwing cream pies." By altering the rules of the game to allow one player to "take over" another players actions, suddenly they become impactable – and suddenly, due to the inverse rules of game mediation, they may be harmed. The act becomes implicitly violent: Like the battered and abused vehicles in *Grand Theft Auto*, to make destructible is to destroy.

Humanist ethics hold that this sort of abuse is the inevitable consequence of transcendental systems of ethics: That is, any code of morality thought to exist outside of the human sphere of self-will and behavior. Any answer to the question of "Why must we be "good" that relies upon transcendental answers: "Because God says so, "Because the State says so," not only defers moral authority, but inevitably places ethical considerations in a position in which they may be manipulated: There are no shortage of people claiming to know God's every whim, or willing to bend the law to accommodate any misanthropy. Here, then, in the digital arena, we encounter a new transcendental model of ethics, which fails along the same lines: Why must we be good? "Because the game says so."

Because while changing a game's rules inevitably affects the formalized functioning of a game-space, these rules can never hope to encapsulate the myriad ways in which play may be subverted, altered or ignored. From a ludic perspective, if every game is comprised of rules, then every game may be cheated. Likewise, from a social perspective, if these online games are not only "play" in the strictest sense, then you are not simply policing "play behaviors," but the entire range of human communication. It is this skepticism of such transcendental models that can give us insight into how we will choose to engage these game-spaces, both in play and in earnest. It is humanism, then that implores us, as Juvenal, to "watch the watchmen." This entails not only inspecting the systematized ethics that comprise the foundations of mediated online spaces, but to take note of the degree to which differences are policed.

5. IN MOD WE TRUST

In part to combat instances of behavior that do not confirm to the rules as mediated, moderators are often brought in, effectively operating to mediate the mediated – through observing and correcting breaches of gameplay. It's fascinating to discuss the presence – or effective absence – of moderators with a player base that seldom sees or hears them. They are often regarded as lesser gods, being in their way, godly. It is, after all, not an unfair comparison. Weiner, in his *God & Golem*, discusses the fashion in which the technologicial moves towards a new divine [27]. Understood as omnipresent, ever-watchful, concerned with wellbeing, and capable of dramatically affecting a game in ways players cannot, this type of "Big Brother" game control lends itself to a new breed of *deus ex machina*. Their very presence implies that players are only as good as their minders, and no type of autonomous "good play" is possible. It puts a new twist on an old question: "Can we be good without mod?"

This deferral of authority is, of course, self-defeating. Just as Epicurus, through his "problem of evil" suggested an agnostic position: That is, if the gods exist, then they are incapable of action and thus not worthy of our regard. In the same sense, any player base may respond to the presence of moderation through a similarly agnostic attitude: If mods exist, and abuses of play persist, then they are useless. Beyond this, the very capacity for affecting action that moderators possess directly undermines any mediation of play space. Giving moderators the ability to alter, restore, or even delete play characters gives them same sorts of authority abused by that one malicious spirit decades ago in LambdaMOO. To ensure that these game-spaces not be affected, the act of moderation makes the entire game-space destructible.

This then is the ethical dilemma of the virtual design: The divide between mediation and moderation. To mediate ostensibly "good" play through game design, to physically disallow negative behaviors, is the ultimate deferral of ethical responsibility. Since systemically improper actions are impossible, all considerations of "good" and "bad" play are deferred, as all behaviors inevitably produce the same result. This is the Kantian nightmare: Existing within a system devoted to addressing all morality, we do worse than abdicate responsibility. We abdicate choice itself.

6. I AM A VIRTUAL PERSON. NOTHING VIRTUALLY HUMAN IS ALIEN TO ME

Humanism must be prepared to reject all transcendental systems of ethics, even those hardbound, or enforced from on high. It's true that mediated ethics may be written directly into the game itself, engrained in substance more immutable than granite. But just because something is written in stone does not make it so. It's also true that moderators transform game-space into one that is implicitly understood as social, through the possibility of a discerning gaze – but humanists of all persuasions have had their fill of invisible bogeymen. Any humanist response to the digital, then, is equally Kantian and Epicurean: If moderators exist largely as spectre, we may safely ignore them. "The game" in these terms is more enjoyable than any enforced notions of "moderated play." As Kant, we must reserve the right to make play choices – not to ignore questions of good play, but to answer them ourselves, in a way that is both more contentious and more fulfilling than any ingrained rule set.

Through this, we can arrive at two modest positions in relation to the question of digital mediation: One common sense, one perhaps counterintuitive. Firstly, we must be prepared to extend our own ethics into game-spaces: We must abandon the excuse that anything we do is "unreal" or "just a game," and hold ourselves to

a standard of keeping in accordance with our actual, offline ethics. These "virtualized" personal ethics need not be identical, as often virtualized spaces may differ radically from actual ones – but the one may inform the other.

Secondly, we must be prepared to move to the virtual frontiers – to choose games in which our capacity to affect ourselves and others is less rigorously mediated, in which interactions are less scrupulously moderated. In playing and designing unpoliced spaces, in moving to separate notions of impact and harm from the anarchic models of play that inform them, we may begin to take back for ourselves a range of behaviors. It is here, beyond strictures of mediated action, that we may truly begin to "play well." The digital field, for now, remains a plastic enough place that we may decide what forms it is to take. The digital humanist must be prepared to stake out a claim to a freer experience: One in which, even at our most abstract, we may remain humane.

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