# BEYOND THE HEADSET:
NAVIGATING ETHICAL MINEFIELD

Presenters: Aiperi B., Rooshni Dash

When Reality isn't Real...

ABOUT BOOK & AUTHOR

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- Professor and media ethics scholar at Manhattan University
- Expert in communication ethics and digital technologies
- Author of multiple works on media ethics and documentary filmmaking

ETHICS OF VIRTUAL REALITY

TECHNOLOGY AND EXPERIENCE

Michael J. Grabowski
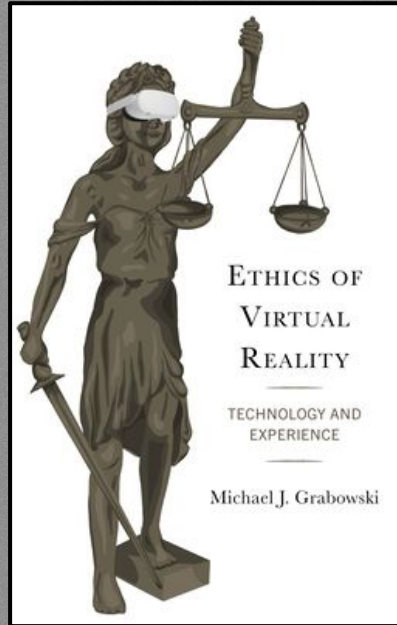
- The book addresses critical questions: Who should control and access VR? How does VR affect privacy, bias, and misrepresentation? What rules should govern harassment and abuse in virtual spaces?
- Grabowski draws parallels with other digital technologies (e.g., social media, AI) to analyze who benefits and who is harmed by VR, and forecasts possible futures for the technology

Focus: Applying established ethical theories to VR technology **Approach:** Systematic examination of VR's moral implications
Scope: From individual privacy to societal transformation

SUMMARY

Grabowski's Framework:

1. **Descriptive Ethics:** What is VR actually doing?
2. **Normative Ethics:** What should VR do?
3. **Applied Ethics:** How do we implement ethical VR?

VR represents more than entertainment

it's a fundamental shift in human experience that demands serious ethical consideration.

Key Quote: *"It's enough to make you want to take off the headset and retreat to the natural world, but the only way to access these classes, and eventually the credentialing and degree to allow you to work and advance in this world, is to participate in the virtual landscape."(p.10)*

Dystopian Potential

"Some are rewarded more than others; users are viewed as more desirable. Users respond by sculpting their digital avatars and personas to conform to a perceived idealized Hollywood-wood ideal that they more closely resemble with each virtual villager."(p.12)

Control & Manipulation

"Companies behind these distractions invest millions of dollars refining their algorithms to break down your resistance to them. The manipulation operates below conscious awareness, making true consent impossible."(p.22)

KEY INSIGHTS

VR's immersive nature creates "virtually real experiences" that can have real psychological and social impacts.

Ethical challenges include:

- Privacy and consent
- Physical and mental harm
- Harassment and abuse
- Accessibility and bias
- Control and governance of virtual spaces

Grabowski argues for the need to apply and adapt ethical theories to these new contexts, as traditional moral responsibilities often do not translate directly to digital environments

WHAT DO DIFFERENT ETHICAL FRAMEWORKS SAY?

UTILITARIANISM	Weighs overall benefits vs. harms of VR (e.g., does VR improve well-being or cause more harm through addiction, isolation, or abuse?
KANTIANISM	Focuses on respect for persons—users should not be treated as means to an end (e.g., informed consent, no manipulation
HEDONISM	Prioritizes pleasure and avoidance of pain—raises questions about escapism and addiction in VR
EXISTENTIALISM	Explores authenticity and freedom in self-creation within virtual worlds VR may enable "bad faith" and avoidance of real-world responsibility

EXAMPLES

HARASSMENT IN VR SOCIAL SPACES

In 2021, multiple users reported experiencing sexual harassment and bullying in popular VR chat platforms. The immersive nature of VR made these experiences feel 'real,' leading to emotional distress and calls for better moderation and safety features.

DATA BREACH

A major VR headset manufacturer was found to be collecting and selling detailed user movement and biometric data without explicit consent, sparking debates about privacy, transparency, and user rights.
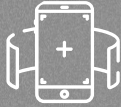
WHAT IT MEANS FOR US?

01

Individual Level
Maintain authentic identity while engaging with virtual worlds

02

Corporate Level
Design for human flourishing, not addiction
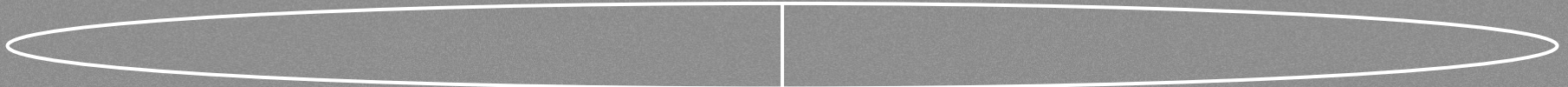
03

Societal Level
Ensure equitable access and democratic governance

04

Global Level
Preserve human agency in increasingly virtual world

OUR POSITION

VR ethics requires balancing individual autonomy (Kantian), collective welfare (Utilitarian), and authentic human flourishing (Virtue Ethics). No single framework alone can address VR's complexity.

Grabowski's Synthesis:

"The ethical discussions in this book are both descriptive: what situations may occur that require making an ethical decision, and prescriptive: what one ought to do in such a situation."

The Imperative:

Users must be treated as ends, never merely as means for data collection!

VR can transform education, healthcare, work, and social interaction—but also risks deepening digital divides, enabling new forms of harassment, and eroding privacy.

MAIN PURPOSE

Grabowski's Central Mission:

Transform VR development from a purely technical endeavor into an ethical one.

The Book's Goal:

Provide practical ethical frameworks for:

- **Developers:** Building responsible VR systems
- **Policymakers:** Creating appropriate regulations
- **Users:** Making informed choices about VR engagement
- **Society:** Preparing for VR's transformative impact

Our Purpose Today:

Demonstrate that VR ethics isn't abstract philosophy—it's urgent, practical necessity for our digital future.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- VR ethics is not just theoretical; it requires proactive design, ongoing reflection, and shared responsibility among developers, users, and policymakers.
- Ethical frameworks provide essential guidance, but must be adapted to the unique challenges of immersive, interactive environments.
- The main purpose: To ensure VR technologies are developed and used in ways that maximize benefits, minimize harm, and promote fairness, dignity, and well-being for all participant

How will you maintain your authentic self in virtual spaces?

What ethical standards will you demand from VR developers?

How do we ensure VR enhances rather than replaces genuine human connection?

"If you were the developer, what steps would you take to address this issue ethically?"