

Beyond the Headset: Navigating the Ethical Minefield

Virtual reality is becoming more than just a play zone for people playing games. It is reshaping whole industries like education, health care, and socialization completely. Yet, as Michael Grabowski identifies in *Ethics of Virtual Reality*, the technology brings us back to ethics 101, making us rethink age-old questions such as: who controls these digital playgrounds? How can we protect users from harm when it is virtually and absolutely indistinguishable from reality? Our paper applies utilitarianism, Kantian ethics, and virtue ethics to the most pressing ethics of VR which includes data breaches, harassment, and failure to account for accessibility issues. Grabowski's *Ethics of Virtual Reality* is not a theoretical exercise, but a call to action. He organised his thinking and structure to be answerable to three questions. What is VR doing? Immersive by design, VR ironically obscures the line between reality and non-reality because “virtually real” experiences have very real psychological consequences. For instance, users experience trauma from acts of harassment delivered virtually, and biometric collection, private data collection enables the possible commodification of the user into a dataset. What should VR do? Grabowski argues to prioritise human dignity over profit. Grabowski critiques companies or people that enable or conduct acts of harassment, like Meta's Horizon Worlds by collecting, selling or distributing user data. Grabowski argues, VR must innovate but must also have boundaries and ethical rails in place. How do we create ethical VR? Some of the solutions include co-created moderation policies, data practices transparency, and inclusive designs to mitigate measured bias. Grabowski compares the challenges that VR faces to social media's failures, emphasizing that ethics cannot be an afterthought.

What is particularly interesting about Grabowski's analysis is his recognition that moral frameworks, developed in traditional settings, do not translate directly into technology-based environments. He offers, "The ethical discussions in this book are both descriptive: what situations may occur that will require us to make an ethical decision about, and prescriptive: what we ought to do in that situation." (Grabowski 12) The descriptive and prescriptive duality recognizes the problem of both genuinely balancing the novelty of VR's ethical challenges in addition to providing guidance for practical ethical decision making.

The book's strongest insight, however, comes from Grabowski's caution and observation about how VR can be used for manipulation and control. He states, "Companies that own these distractions, and make apps and gear for these distractions, spend millions of dollars improving their algorithms to wear down your resolve and not pay attention to them. The manipulation they engage in operates below the level of conscious awareness, so consent is irrelevant." (Grabowski 22) Conclusively, VR represents a more profound potential for stripping away user perception of autonomy, which is far more intrusive than conventional media. This is not just a matter of putting on a headset for fun but entering into domains in which our actions, our relationships, and perhaps our being can be fundamentally altered.

Traditional ethical theories provide some clarity regarding the ethical considerations facing VR; but a single theory comes up short. Each of the major theories: Kantian deontology, utilitarianism, and virtue ethics have their benefits but do not encompass the entire ethical dimensions of VR.

The fact that VR companies can indiscriminately collect sensitive biometric data without any meaningful consent contravenes Kant's principle of treating people with dignity and autonomy.

Grabowski's observation that "users are seen as more desirable"(Grabowski 12) and respond by "sculpting their digital avatars and personas to be consistent with a perceived idealized Hollywood trope or character"(Grabowski 12) exemplify how VR spaces can compromise authenticity.

From a Kantian ethical viewpoint, systems that manipulate users into following artificial standards treat them as ends to a profit rather than recognizing their intrinsic, autonomous choice. However, Kantian ethics alone cannot handle complex VR unconcernedly. Kantianism establishes clear principles for treating users and others with dignity, but it does not provide the best tools for weighing conflicting interests or instances when respect for an individual's autonomy may violate the interest of the social whole. For example, should VR platforms determine when to restrict certain types of violent content even when that content is something chosen by an individual user?

Kantian ethics provides that people are ends, not means. Grabowski applies the principle to VR's data practices, so when headset companies track eye movement or emotional responses in the absence of true, explicit consent, those companies are violating the user's autonomy. The instance involving Meta's 2023 lawsuit for selling biometric data is an example of treating users as something to profit from and not a unique human being (The Guardian). In our view, Kantianism represents the moral underpinning for VR. Even if informed consent is to be meaningful, it cannot be buried in terms of service. Grabowski's comparison with medical ethics is useful here when discussing patients agreeing to surgery, VR users should also have clear, revocable agreements with companies on how they may use their data.

As a normative theory that strives to maximize overall happiness and minimize harm, utilitarian ethics provides a distinct but equally relevant lens for examining VR ethics. As a normative

theory, utilitarian ethics challenges us to consider the full range of benefits that VR has the potential to provide - improved education; therapeutic applications; improved social connectedness - in relation to the full range of risks VR presents - addiction, social isolation, psychological manipulation, etc.

Grabowski's utilitarian concerns are built into analyses of VR's transformative potential. He argues, for example, that VR 'can transform education, healthcare, work, and social interaction', while also acknowledging that VR "also risks amplifying established digital divides, creating new forms of harassment, and undermining privacy." (Grabowski 5) This nuanced assessment of VR captures the essence of utilitarian thinking on maximizing benefits while minimizing harms. However, utilitarianism has limitations too when applied to VR. We do not yet know much about the long-term consequences of the potentially widespread impact of VR technology, making it difficult to accurately calculate utility at the moment. Secondly, utilitarian thinking can often justify specific practices that are troubling as long as it can be concluded that the overall outcomes are positive. In other words, while we might conclude that collecting a lot of data about users to make helpful safety features makes overall sense, the reality is that it has opened up our lives to an unprecedented degree of surveillance, information extraction, and manipulation. Utilitarianism thinks of VR as an application, and thus largely thinks only of VR's net social impact overall. No doubt the potential social benefits are apparent with VR for therapy (i.e. PTSD), VR ends up benefiting millions through use in therapeutic modalities (Grabowski 67). Education in virtual classrooms through VR can benefit students globally, providing an added value to an already disadvantaged population. Grabowski thinks that unregulated platforms created a great deal of social harm far outweighing that potential. For example, a 2021 study found almost half (49%) of female VR users experienced sexual harassment, which is a

significant form of social harm if there are no measures to mitigate it. (NIH). A strict utilitarian approach wants to mitigate harm via moderation and document future structural harm, even if it impedes corporate growth. As stated, we have landed at “utilitarianism is necessary but insufficient.” The first drawback of maximizing “overall good” is silencing marginalized perspectives like disabled users being excluded from access (many VR education tools are inaccessible for disabled students). Grabowski's discussions about “digital divides”(Grabowski 12) suggest for utilitarianism to be effective we have to support equitable techno-social systems as well.

Finally, virtue ethics which targets character development and human flourishing, leads us to probe fundamental issues regarding the impacts of VR on personal authenticity and moral development. Does it help users become virtuous or does it lead them to act on vices? Grabowski bridges this discussion when he speaks to how virtual spaces might allow for bad faith and avoid responsibility in the real world. The virtue ethics perspective is concerned more with what the user takes from the experiences in VR than their participation. For example, if virtual spaces reward users for conforming to a set of artificial beauty standards or allow them to exploit violence without consequence, they are potentially cultivating vices not virtues. This potential is complemented by a desire for VR applications that promote empathy, education, or true social connection as a means for virtuous development. Care ethics highlights relationships and empathy in action, which Grabowski connects VR's toxicity to. Anonymous avatars increasingly introduce an atmosphere of anonymity that cultivates racism and harassment as indicated by 2021's Horizon Venues “virtual groping” incident. (Duffield Techdirt) Our understanding of virtue ethics is the missing piece of the VR puzzle. Governance of virtual spaces, as Grabowski

claims, must represent communal values not corporate negligence which will not scale without enforceable policies.

Grabowski suggests, rather than being viewed as an afterthought, ethics should be placed at the heart of VR development from the outset. Through our analysis we recognized this is a challenge and requires responsibility to be taken at the four levels, ranging from individual to global. Users have a responsibility to actively maintain their authentic identity, while they engage with lived experiences afforded by virtual worlds. Users should assess not only how VR experiences are affecting their values, relationships, and sense of self, but also critically. As Grabowski asked, “How will you maintain your authentic self in virtual spaces?”

This question encourages users to think critically about VR experiences, rather than just accept the next experience that arises. From a corporate level, when it comes to VR developers and companies, they need to “design for human flourishing, not addiction.” This means to put emphasis on user well-being instead of on engagement metrics, as well as their own transparency about how VR systems function. Grabowski’s cautions about algorithmic manipulation demonstrate that ethical VR design means resisting the temptation to profit from our users’ psychological weaknesses. Further, society must strive to “ensure equitable access and democratic governance” of VR technologies. There are also the important questions of addressing digital divides that could potentially circumvent certain populations from benefiting from VR technologies, and who will govern VR systems in ways that offer protections at the same time supporting innovation. On a global scale, we must work to “preserve human agency in an increasingly virtual world.” This is human control over VR technologies wherever they develop, just as the purpose of VR technologies could call for increasing reality, we need to do that while maintaining human autonomy and human dignity.

With all that being said, there is a counter to the critiques that “VR isn’t even Real” and therefore the harm done in VR spaces simply does not matter. However, studies show that harassment in VR can initiate PTSD-like symptoms. While some argue that ethics can stifle innovation, Grabowski argues that medical VR functions under the auspices of Institutional Review Boards demonstrating responsibility and progress can coexist. Grabowski argues ethical VR is more than rules and policies, ethical VR is about designing spaces that express and amplify our shared ethical values. To share responsibility in addressing VR's ethical crises, developers would need to engage an IRB-style ethics review with VR projects, users should demand transparency in the user experience and boycott platforms that are exploitive, and the policymakers need to legislate addressing virtual assault and data rights, treating VR as a social space and not as a game.

What is important is that VR will not escape reality; it will essentially magnify reality. Upon applying utilitarianism, Kantianism, and virtue ethics, ethical VR is not simply a matter of whether to restrict access to technology, but to ensure it is used in alignment with our shared values. From harassment to privacy, the responsibility does not sit solely with the user; instead with the developers and regulators to build immersive worlds that support and empower rather than exploit. As Grabowski points out, the salient question is not “Can we make this?” but “Should we do this?” Answering this question requires courage, creativity, and compassion. The future of VR is contingent upon whether or not we choose humanity first or hype.

Grabowski’s examination of VR leverages the case that VR can be a good tool for positive social change, but can also create a plethora of ethical issues. In order to find productive ways to exploit VR’s usefulness and fears associated with VR, you can’t approach the problem with a one-dimensional response. Developers and designers must derive an ethical element in VR

experience design, so experiences foster prosociality and respect for users' agency. Regulators must pass legislation to dissuade egregious usages of VR that is violent. Lastly, activists and educators must actively teach about the contextual social and psychological impact of VR, so people can consider its usage within their sphere of responsibility.

If we head down the road of the above measures, we can realize the potential of VR as a paradigm-shifting medium that can support positive aspects of humanity and human welfare without the sacrifice of our morals.

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