

GNITN

#280

Virtual Crimes And You

It's Not All Bad

As we head into 2024 artificial intelligence headlines are certain to rise to the top of news feeds more and more. Most of them will be good things as computers can be very helpful and make people and businesses more productive. This video was made possible by technology I couldn't have used a mere five years ago. And I recently rented a car for a short vacation last weekend that steered the car for me for my trip back home. At first it was strange, but eventually I embraced it and sat in the back seat of the car. Not really, I was joking there, but the point is that computer technology isn't all bad. We are much better for these technology advances overall, but any machine that man makes can also be used for nefarious purposes and software and hardware is just a tool in the hands of people who can decide to follow their better angels or not. As the Bible tells us, it is out of the heart that a man speaks and really acts:

For out of the heart come bad thoughts, killing other people, sex sins of a married person, sex sins of a person not married, stealing, lying, speaking against God. (Matt 15:19, NLV)

My toaster or refrigerator aren't going to turn on me no matter how "smart" they are, but about that car...

It's Just A Game

I seem to recall a big brouhaha over video games and violent content not that long ago. As the thinking went, participating in video games that involved graphic violence would one day spill over into real life since it would desensitize participants to think it is normal to do such things. Critics of this assertion almost always pointed to children who watched cartoons of Wiley Coyote and the Roadrunner and noted that children who did turn into psychopaths later in their lives. And then Tipper Gore came along and got into skirmishes with odd defenders of free speech like Dee Snider of Twisted Sister and John Denver over labeling content on record cover albums saying that parents should know if the songs were pushing deviant behavior. And I'm not even going to get into backward masking. However a study does support the notion that watching violent and lewd video content does indeed lead to such behaviors in real life.

Be Careful Little Eyes What You See

According to a [study](#) done by Dartmouth and reported in an online article from *The New Republic*, we read this:

Anxious parents and pundits like to implicate violent video games in practically every societal ill, from drunk driving to school shootings—and though they may come across as hysterical, new research suggests they might have a point. After a four-year longitudinal study of thousands of American teenagers, a team of researchers at Dartmouth has found a strong link between playing violent, "risk-glorifying" video games and engaging in a range of so-called "deviant" behaviors: "alcohol use, smoking cigarettes, delinquency and risky sex."

How did they figure this out? The article tell us:

Using randomly generated phone numbers, Jay Hull, a professor of psychological and brain sciences, and his colleagues at Dartmouth identified 5,000 American adolescents willing to participate in the study. (Of the initial sample, only 35.5 percent said they didn't play video

games; another 15 percent said their parents didn't let them play violent ones.) Hull asked the teenagers questions about their gaming habits, as well as their attitudes toward, and experiences of, drinking, smoking and "risky" sex (without condoms or with many partners). The researchers assessed the kids' personality traits by having them rate statements like, "I like to do scary things," "I like to do dangerous things," and "I like to break the rules." They asked how many times in the previous month they'd shoved someone or gotten in a fight. Hull followed up every year for the next four—and found that every "deviant" behavior they measured increased almost in direct relation to the time spent playing video games. The effect was the same for both genders, though boys were much more likely to report playing violent video games in the first place.

Christians who know their Bibles could have predicted this, but it's nice when secular sources finally figure it out.

But I Was Only Playing Pacman

When talking about video games or even arcade games, the actual gameplay must be considered. It is not simple games like pinball or games my friends played in the 1980s like Galaga or Space Invaders, no we're talking about interactive games where you became a part of the game as a character and immerse yourself in the actions. The article goes on to make that distinction:

"I was interested in the idea that in playing these games, you identify with the characters, and as a consequence, your sense of self changes," said Hull, over the phone. Parents fret about what movies and television their kids will be exposed to, but people forge a stronger identification with the characters by impersonating them through video games than just by watching them. "If you're playing an anti-social character and identifying with their motives, that will warp your own sense of right and wrong in everyday life," said Hull. "In Manhunt, you're directed to kill people in brutal, torturous ways. You're given chainsaws and plastic bags, and the more creative ways you come up with to kill people, the more points you get. In Grand Theft Auto, you're a thug. You're shooting people in the head and fighting police. You're stealing cars. You're breaking the law."

Age may also play a factor:

Adolescents may be particularly vulnerable to this effect. "Their sense of self is fragile," said Hull. "They're looking for new and exciting things."

It's Not Real Though Is It?

And that brings us to today where a new wrinkle in the reality game is exploding all around us. Virtual reality (VR) was all the rage with sites like Second Life where you created a new you so to speak and then interacted with others virtual people. Now you were actually interfacing with other people. And then there is what is known as augmented reality (AR), which allows participants to see, hear and in some cases feel what is happening. I know you've seen commercials where people are wearing goggles and even gloves as they are doing things that aren't really happening except in their perception. This is what we call the metaverse and it combines both VR and AR. Simple versions had one experiencing that roller coaster ride without ever leaving your dining room. If you think this is new, it really isn't. Flight simulators have been around for a long time and they allowed people to learn how to fly and make mistakes that would cause a crash if done in real life without dying. Learning without doing the real thing as it

were. However, fantasy lives can also be created and experienced now in ways not known until now. And this is where things can get more than a little dicey.

A Virtual Crime?

Yes, you heard me, a crime done only in the metaverse. Perhaps you've read about this in the news, but in Great Britain they are investigating a case where an underage girl was raped while using the metaverse. Here is how an [article](#) from the *Daily Mail* reports on this disturbing story: *Police are investigating the first case of rape in the metaverse after a child was 'attacked' in a virtual reality video game.*

The girl under the age of 16 is said to have been left distraught after her avatar – her digital character – was gang raped by the online strangers.

The headset-wearing victim did not suffer any injuries as there was no physical attack.

Some would say that it is just make believe and couldn't possibly be considered a crime anymore than a person planning such an act only in their minds. But this could actually be one as the article tell us:

But officers said she suffered the same psychological and emotional trauma as someone who has been raped in the real world as the 'VR' experience is designed to be completely immersive.

It is thought to be the first time in the UK that a virtual sexual offence has been investigated by police.

While we don't know where this case will eventually go, it does point out a dangerous problem of trying to create a place where reality can be created that is meant to do more than mimic real life. I can actually put the user in a place where the person can get harmed virtually.

It Could Be A Big Problem

These virtual reality headsets are becoming a big thing as we also read:

Virtual reality headsets were expected to be a popular gift this Christmas, with the NSPCC estimating that 15 per cent of children aged between five and ten have used one and 6 per cent use one daily.

Led by Facebook co-founder Mark Zuckerberg, tech giants have bet billions of pounds on drawing people – young and old – towards the virtual realm of the 'metaverse', selling the chance to live a digitised, fantasy life.

Going back to the virtual crime we read this as well:

The victim was in an online 'room' with a large number of fellow users when the virtual assault by several adult men took place.

Police leaders are now calling for legislation to tackle a wave of sexual offending in such a sphere, saying officers' tactics must evolve to stop perverts using new technology to exploit children.

Law Enforcement is taking this seriously:

Police leaders are now calling for legislation to tackle a wave of sexual offending in such a sphere, saying officers' tactics must evolve to stop perverts using new technology to exploit children.

But the landmark case has prompted questions about whether police should be pursuing virtual offences – given police and prosecutors are currently struggling with an enormous backlog of actual rape cases – and if such an attack should be prosecuted under current laws.

Yesterday the National Police Chiefs' Council's Child Protection and Abuse Investigation Lead, Ian Critchley, warned 'the metaverse creates a gateway for predators to commit horrific crimes against children'.

The article spends time pointing out that the legal system is lagging behind in dealing with the crimes that could eventually be seen from this new virtual world we've created. But what about Christians? Does the Bible address this? Well of course it does.

Things Done In The Heart

You have heard that it was said, You shall not commit adultery.

28 But I say to you that everyone who so much as looks at a woman with evil desire for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. (Matt 5:27-28, AMPC)

I'm not sure what kind of defense that attorneys will use for these virtual crimes, but the Bible would convict them based on the words of Jesus here. The metaverse actually allows these people to act out what is in their hearts which Jesus told us already convicts us. Sadly, this is yet another example of good technology gone bad. By thinking it is neutral doesn't mean users will always gravitate to playing nice. For all the benefits from using the metaverse such as working out the kinks in a process without having to build prototypes or even getting in a fun workout fighting with a virtual light saber, the dark side is always lurking looking for a way to come out. Only God can not only reveal that darkness and but then deal with it before it ever harms a person in real life. Holy Spirit does indeed lead us into truth even the inconvenient ones. The virtual assault merely exposed what was in their hearts to begin with. God, who knows what is in the heart can do the needed surgery that laws cannot ever hope to address. Let us pray that the makers of this technology can keep pandora's box closed long enough for society to reign in its degenerate, debased, and decadent potential before it is too late. Unfortunately, I think that box was opened a long time ago and only God can close it. Seeking the God who created our hearts and minds is our only hope.