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Rape or “rape”?

Questioning the boundaries between the physical and the virtual*

Abstract

Although incidents of online sexual assault are becoming increasingly common, the concept of virtual rape still needs critical examination. Contrary to conventional wisdom, I first argue that virtual rape should not be seen as a metaphorical term, let alone an oxymoron. Focusing on the embodied conditions that define presence in immersive environments, I then draw a phenomenologically inspired distinction between physical and bodily to challenge the idea that virtual rape is nothing more than psychological violence. Lastly, I introduce the notion of somatechnical body to clarify the specific nature of virtual rape.

Keywords:

Virtual rape, Embodiment, Bilocation

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1. “Just quit the game!”

On 1 January 2024, the *Daily Mail*'s crime and security editor Rebecca Camber has no time to toast the New Year before she must go straight back to work to break some bad news. The British police have launched an investigation against persons unknown for the reported gang rape of a 16-year-old girl. Not in the street, not in a club or an apartment had the heinous crime allegedly been perpetrated, but rather online, in the metaverse. Details are sketchy: we only know that the teenager was wearing a virtual reality headset and playing an unspecified immersive game when several individuals, hiding their identity behind male avatars, suddenly assaulted her digital persona¹, first verbally and then “physically”.

The inverted commas I have just used spontaneously reveal all my difficulty with understanding and describing the experience in question. And one only has to scroll through the search engine results pages displayed after keying in “virtual rape” to notice how many journalists suffered a similar embarrassment and felt compelled to use the same typographic convention in order to express their uncertainty about how to properly define the offence they were covering. In a nutshell, the young woman had allegedly been “raped”, indeed, but only in a manner of speaking.

On social media, the allusive and intrinsically ambiguous nature of paragraphemic signs was rapidly supplanted by peremptory statements made by users paying little attention to the subtleties of linguistic constructs. When the *New York Post* delivered the news on its Instagram profile, most reactions – also thanks to the anonymity guaranteed using nicknames – were either sceptical or overly sarcastic. Iroki, for example, likes multiplayer role-playing military simulations: “In *War thunder* the enemy tank shot my barrel and pushed me into the red zone, from behind. It felt like a virtual rape”. Greg8854321 prefers the criminal setting of *Grand theft auto*: “Somebody stole my millions in *GTA*. Bring it back pls. Cash is ok”. On the same wavelength Eloriginaldemo: “I was killed in *Call of duty*. Been waiting for my killer to be brought to justice”².

¹ <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-12917329/Police-launch-investigation-kind-virtual-rape-metaverse.html> (retrieved February 28, 2024).

² <https://www.instagram.com/nypost/p/C1ngIOZIBSe/> (retrieved February 28, 2024).

From labelling virtual violence as unreal or pretend violence to sharing the victim-blaming attitude typical of rape culture it is but a short step. In 2014, a woman had already reported having been virtually abused by players who had previously modified parts of the code in *Grand theft auto V* so that they could sexually assault female characters and then share the videos on YouTube: “Why didn’t she just quit the game if it was that horrible?”, a user named DownwardConcept commented on SteamGifts; “If she stayed and endured the whole freaking thing it’s her fault”³.

It would be all too easy to dismiss these comments, and countless others like them, as the superficial, hasty utterances of “keyboard warriors”, but it would also be to overlook the problem (at once theoretical, ethical, political, and legal) that they highlight. On closer inspection, one and the same leitmotif lies at the heart of their sneering tone: reality in the flesh would be one thing, virtual “reality” (and here we are again with the quotation marks) another completely different thing. Only the former would be genuinely real. This seemingly straightforward argument rests on two implicit assumptions, namely (i) the opposition between reality and virtuality, and (ii) the definition of reality as “physical” and virtuality as “incorporeal”. Being abused in the physical environment would then be real abuse, whereas being abused in a virtual world would merely be metaphorical, “sort of” abuse.

The very fact that the British law enforcement agencies felt obliged to open an official (and, without a shadow of a doubt, real) inquiry proves that things are not as simple as they might at first seem. Yet at the same time, the list is growing of those who, however grudgingly, cannot help but underscore the uncertainty surrounding the alleged crime, the weaknesses of the evidence, as well as the possible invalidity of the procedures adopted in the context of the existing legal system. The Sexual Offences Act defines rape as non-consensual penetration. Accordingly, the absence of any physical contact whatsoever would make the whole case extremely problematic and logically objectionable, if not completely meaningless. No sexual assault in the proper sense of the word would have ever taken place. The authorities hence insist on the urgent need to amend national legislation by introducing specific new laws against the fast-increasing, multifaceted threat of sexual cyberviolence.

³ <https://www.steamgifts.com/discussion/98Got/girl-claims-she-was-virtually-raped-in-gta-v/search?page=2> (retrieved February 29, 2024).

Note that the subject is by no means new. The first explicit mention of a virtual rape dates back to 1993 when Julian Dibbell, a freelance journalist with a strong interest in web subcultures, slinked into the meanderings of LambdaMOO, a multi-user dungeon (MUD) online community created in 1990 by Microsoft’s Pavel Curtis at Xerox PARC and now hosted in the state of Washington. The characteristic feature of this digital world is the absence of visual elements such as avatars and graphic scenarios. Individuals interact with each other within a text-based virtual reality where everything must be described in words, in a kind of dizzying contemporary ekphrasis which tasks users with imaginatively figuring out, based on what they read, what the places and people that bring LambdaMOO to life could look like.

It is in this peculiar cyberspace that a certain Mr Bungle made his appearance one night in March, presenting himself as an overweight, greasy-haired, Bisquick-faced clown dressed in semen-stained harlequin garb, his trousers cinched at the waist by a trashy mistletoe-and-hemlock belt whose large buckle bore an inscription that could hardly be more explicit: “Kiss me under this, bitch!”. Using a digital voodoo doll, i.e., a program designed to hack into a user’s digital identity and take control of it (Slavkovik, Stachl, Pitman, Askonas 2021), the sinister clown, who later turned out to be a student at New York University, forced the virtual alter egos of other visitors to both perform and submit to brutal sexual acts of all kinds before being blocked by the system administrators (so-called “wizards”) and eventually banned from the community.

After interviewing the victims of Mr Bungle’s assaults, Dibbell points to the violence of post-traumatic shock and the *physiological* consequences of the events taking place in the digital world: “Amid flurries of even the most cursorily described caresses, sighs, or penetrations, the glands do engage, and often as throbbingly as they would in a real-life assignation. [...] And if the virtual setting and the interplayer vibe are right, who knows? The heart may engage as well, stirring up passions as strong as many that bind lovers who observe the formality of trysting in the flesh”. Immediately afterwards, the journalist goes on to observe:

No bodies touched. Whatever physical interaction occurred consisted of a mingling of electronic signals sent from sites spread out between New York City and Melbourne, Australia. [...] To participate, therefore, in this disembodied enactment of life’s most body-centred activity is to risk the realization that when it comes to sex, perhaps the body in question is not the physical one at all, but its psychic double, the bodylike self-representation we carry around in our heads – and that whether

we present that body to another as a meat puppet or a word puppet is not nearly as significant a distinction as one might have thought. (Dibbell 1993: 16)

In emphasising the visceral impact of virtual meetings and virtual violence, Dibbell moves in a different direction from the social media users mentioned above. What is more, he goes so far as to undermine any clean-cut opposition between the physical and the mental, as well as between the physical and the virtual. Questioning the very nature of the body and how we present it to others, the ambiguous notion of bodylike self-representation provides a good starting point for addressing presence and interaction in immersive digital worlds.

2. *Bodies in/and virtual environments: a co-constitution*

To shed light on the thorny issues that have begun to surface, we shall muse upon some aspects that differentiate seemingly identical, or at the very least remarkably similar, experiences. To start with, let us return to the mocking tone of most of the social media comments on the virtual rape. As can be seen from the examples listed above which supported the claim that this should not be considered real violence, these comments came from people who can often be identified as ordinary video gamers. Whether they refer to *War thunder*, *Call of duty*, or *Grand theft auto*, they all agree on the same idea: by choosing to participate in an online game, the teenager had, in their view, entered a virtual, *that is* fictional, and *therefore* unreal universe. Nothing that occurred there would then have happened for real.

However, in addition to assuming that playing would be inherently unreal, which is by no means a given, the near-unanimous consensus that this line of reasoning has garnered overshadows the crucial point of the explicitly *immersive* character of the game at issue. The ambiguity surrounding the semantics of immersion is well known. Broadly understood, the term can be used to describe the sense of “absorption” or “transportation” which characterises not only (video) games but any fictional experience from daydreaming to reading a novel, from enjoying a theatrical performance to watching a movie (Wolf, Bernhart, Mahler 2013; Liptay, Dogramaci 2016). Such “definitional conflicts” (Calleja 2011: 19) do not help to clarify the problem at hand for the simple reason that they disregard the medium specificity of immersive virtual reality and its peculiar agency.

To be sure, there is no need to call upon the founding fathers and mothers of the notion of medium specificity – from Lessing (1766) and Herder (1778) through Greenberg (1940) to the critical reworkings by Carroll (1985) and Krauss (1999), to name but a few – in order to grasp the role that an accurate definition of the characteristics of each medium plays for understanding both the possibilities it offers and the constraints it imposes. These characteristics are not only of ontological and phenomenological nature but also pertain to the socio-political and cultural spheres, as well as to the imaginaries in which a medium is framed. Immersive virtual reality is no exception. Playing a video game on a smart TV or console monitor is not the same for the user as playing it wearing a headset, headphones, and perhaps – in a future that is still hypothetical but not too far away for the insiders – a pair of haptic gloves or a suit equipped with tactile sensors and actuators distributed over the entire surface of the body.

This brings us to the second point I wish to emphasise by looking further into the infamous case of Mr Bungle and the first virtual rape to have made the headlines. Regardless of how many similarities can be drawn with the assault on the teenager’s avatar (among which the sexual nature of the violence, the fact that both crimes took place in virtual worlds, and the real impact they have had on the victims), one cannot but underline a crucial difference, namely the absence of an authentic form of embodiment in the textual world of LambdaMOO. Dibbell already noted this as he characterised online life in terms of a “disembodied” enactment of experiences that in flesh-and-blood reality would instead require full bodily participation. Yet it is precisely the notion of embodiment that has taken on radically new meanings with the advent of virtual reality in the strict sense of the technology allowing the creation and enjoyment of image-environments (Pinotti 2021) in which the user can feel immersed to the point of becoming an integral and – literally – *constitutive* part of them.

Let us ponder on this constitution and how it is implemented. Experimental research (Slater 2007; Slater *et al.* 2009; Kiltner *et al.* 2015; Guterstam *et al.* 2023) has provided extensive evidence of the power of simulated virtual worlds to induce an astonishing sense of presence (*place illusion*), to elicit responses similar to those one would have if one were in the physical world (*plausibility illusion*), and to evoke the impression of “inhabiting” digital bodies (*body-ownership illusion*). Most interesting, however, is a feature that only emerges thanks to a phenomenological description of virtual reality *experience* as a whole. Irrespective of the visible presence of an avatar presenting a body (or a portion of it) in which the

user feels, indeed, embodied, the image-environment is always and only constituted in accordance with our kinesthesia and our situated point of view. And vice versa: our sensorimotor experience is always and only constituted in accordance with the changing stimuli provided by the simulated environment. The image world unfolds thanks to our embodied experience of it, while at the same time, our subjective experience unfolds thanks to the simultaneous articulation of either the computer-generated imagery or the pre-rendered recording of the environment.

The medium specificity of virtual reality lies in this co-constitution of the image world and the body that explores it. Even in so-called cinematic VR – that is, in those immersive experiences that only provide three degrees of freedom (3-DoF), being limited to tracking the rotational movements and positions of just the user’s head – the image still articulates thanks to its actualisation through the immersant’s embodied experience. This is even more true in the case of virtual environments based on interfaces specifically designed to provide six degrees of freedom (6-DoF), where the sensors built into the headset and controllers, and increasingly into haptic gloves and suits, track not only rotational but also translational movements in real-time, thus granting users the possibility of moving forward or backward, left or right, up or down in the simulated world.

In this respect, Uexküll’s *Umwelt* theory (Uexküll 1934), Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological account of embodied experience (Merleau-Ponty 1945) and the recent approaches they have informed (just think of ecological psychology, enactivism, and 4E cognition) can be fruitfully applied not only to physical but also to virtual environments. In either case, sensorimotor activity is taken to play an essential role in the articulation of perceptual, cognitive, and emotional processes. As regards simulated digital environments, this means that the embodied encounter and mutual exchange between the organism and the image world “always entails, as its *minimal but intrinsic form of interactivity*, a *shared performativity* [...]”. The interface of virtual reality confronts us with an image that co-constitutes itself in accordance with the embodied movement of its experienter” (Dalmasso 2023: 150). Therefore, the medium specificity of virtual reality is to be found in its *inherently* “subjective” nature (Bédard 2019), given that the simulation is enacted by the experienter’s aesthetic (in the primary sense of *esthesis*) performance. This is why immersive virtual universes have been described from a semiotic perspective as “self-centred worlds” in which users act as co-enunciators of the image (Eugeni, Catricalà 2020). Although strongly mediated by rapidly evolving technological apparatuses, such a new form

of organism-environment mutuality can elicit an unprecedented feeling of non-mediatedness, thus opening a new chapter in the complex history, mythology, and ideology of transparency (Bolter, Grusin 1998; Alloa 2011).

This brings us to the issue of virtual reality as a medium hailed as being capable of “disappearing”. By remediating the linguistic and stylistic figures of cinematic point of view shot (POV) and videogame first-person shot (Eugeni 2015; Mateer 2017: 14), simulated immersive environments would famously unveil “the ultimate empathy machine” (Milk 2015; cf. Fischer 2017), giving users the chance to step into another’s shoes (whether other people, or different animals or plant species, or even “alien” entities) and to understand, if not perceive, “what it feels like”. The rhetoric that has accompanied and supported the rapid development and marketing of the medium in recent years, as well as its mainstream use to promote prosocial behaviour, has been subject to critical analysis aimed at disclosing and downplaying utopian claims which are often blatantly naive (Bollmer 2017; Nakamura 2020; Conte 2020; Pinotti 2020; Sora-Domenjó 2022). Once misleading narratives and bombastic slogans have been set aside, however, the question remains as to how embodiment is concretely achieved in *different* virtual environments.

3. *The somatechnical body*

As mentioned previously, LambdaMOO’s text-based interface drastically limits the possibilities of feeling embedded in the digital world. Researchers who analysed the case of Mr Bungle in depth observed that having access solely to a verbal form of communication makes user interaction “not as salient, not as three-dimensional, not as ‘present’ as in a face-to-face interaction” (Huff, Johnson, Miller 2003: 108). Evidence is provided here for linking the sense of presence (best summed up by the notion that has become the motto of virtual reality: “being there”) with the perceptual and agential dynamics that develop in face-to-face experience.

In line with these findings, several empirical studies have demonstrated that the impression of owning and “inhabiting” a body, thus perceiving it as the seat of one’s self, mostly depends on first-person visual perspective and is strengthened by synchronous multisensory stimulation (Ehrsson 2007; Petkova, Ehrsson 2008; Petkova, Khoshnevis, Ehrsson 2011; Gorisse *et al.* 2017). The connection between bodily experience and self-awareness is, of course, no surprise as long as we refer to our biological

body. However, experimental research has focused on so-called body swapping, which denotes the plasticity of the self and our startling ability to “transfer” ourselves (that is, our selves) into virtual bodies which can look remarkably different from our physical body.

This is of paramount importance for the question we are addressing. The sarcasm with which so many social media users responded to the news of the virtual rape of an underage girl makes it apparent that such a reaction took no account of how embodiment is achieved in immersive virtual worlds. More specifically, the porosity of the boundaries between the physical and the virtual that comes up through the aforementioned studies is entirely neglected. The sense of being embodied in technologically mediated environments can be so powerful as to bring about drastic changes in bodily self-consciousness (Blanke, Metzinger 2009), making the user feel that their self – understood primarily as the centre of the individual’s (kin)aesthetic consciousness – is located “inside” a virtual body. And here we go once more with the quotation marks, this time, however, deliberately used as scare quotes to leave no doubt about the metaphorical sense of the word, thus avoiding the risk of falling back into old-fashioned notions such as mind-body dualism and all the false assumptions they rest upon.

Indeed, the phenomenon of body-swapping should not be interpreted through the lens of a hydraulic model according to which there would be a self “in itself” that would then be transferred, as in communicating vessels, from the physical body into the virtual body. Rather, the self and the bodily experiential practices are to be conceived of as a single whole – and this applies to the biological body as well as the virtual body, which both exist, only on different, *though not entirely separate*, ontological levels. The virtual body cannot be called unreal in the usual sense, for the virtual (as philosophy has taught us long before the advent of immersive media) is innervated by the real, and conversely, the real always bears within itself a dimension of virtuality (cf. Diodato 2005).

Nonetheless, in the scientific literature as well as in the lay media, when the notion of “virtual body” is introduced, the emphasis is often on the first term: it is seen as a dematerialised, and therefore illusory, hence unreal or ghostly body. The social media posts we have been discussing so far are a paradigmatic case in point. My proposal goes in the exact opposite direction. When we talk about virtual bodies, we should put *at least* as much emphasis on the second term as we do on the first. Of course, a gynaecological examination would only confirm that the teen-

ager who was virtually raped suffered no physical harm in the usual sense. However, this “usual sense” refers only to what phenomenologists have called the thing-body (*Körper*), as opposed to the lived body (*Leib*). Phenomenologically, the body is to be seen as a lived “here” from which all perceptual cues can only be felt in the first person and as the centre of movement possibilities which point beyond what our current, momentary perspective affords. The concept of kinaesthetic consciousness, sketched out by Husserl in the second and the third volumes of the *Ideen* and further developed by Merleau-Ponty, describes the self as the embodied subjective experience of being geared to an environment where possibilities are given to perceptual and practical activities.

Originally formulated in relation to the biological body, the phenomenological distinction between *Körper* and *Leib* is being enriched with new meanings through the development of immersive virtual environments. In other words, the old Heideggerian notion of our natural being-in-the-world is becoming too narrow a concept and should be reformulated to include virtual environments in their complex interweaving with the physical environment. This also calls for a more accurate distinction between the *physical* and the *bodily* (and hence also between the *non-physical* and the *non-bodily*) in immersive image worlds. By plunging herself into an immersive virtual reality, the teenager came to inhabit a (virtual) body in the first person – a body that thus became, if only partially and momentarily, the seat of her (virtual) self.

If we return now to those scornful comments about virtual rape, I argue that they manifest a deep cultural tendency to objectify the body to the point of reducing it to its bare physicality. This is especially true for the *female* body. Among the multifarious kinds of gender oppression, sexual objectification (Fredrickson, Roberts 1997) is known to occur in both interpersonal encounters and media. Images from television, films, newspapers, videogames, and social networks tend to make women the target of an objectifying gaze due to which the female body comes to be scrutinised and evaluated as a passive, limp, unconscious entity that only exists for the pleasure and use of others. This, in turn, can easily lead to de- or infra-humanization, decreased attribution of mind (and pain), and diminished perception of agency (Loughnan *et al.* 2010; Cikara, Eberhardt, Fiske 2011; Awasthi 2017; Laugerud 2023). As a result, the sociocultural practices and discourses that contribute to shaping the individual identity are often informed by deeply rooted biases that make women the object of unwanted attention and sexual coercion. If every body is (also) a socially

constructed and “cultural marked” body (Ihde 2002: 70), we could say that one pervasive “mark” of female bodies is that they are more easily reduced from *Leiber* to *Körper* than male bodies. Thus, women are more likely than men to be harassed, assaulted, violated, and ridiculed – *both in the streets of some cities and in an online metaverse platform*, where, according to the so-called Proteus effect (Yee, Bailenson 2007 and 2009), the visual characteristics of avatars are closely associated with certain expectations and behavioural stereotypes.

The socio-cultural construction of the female body as a thing-body has had a major impact on how we perceive and define rape in terms of physical assault alone. In all cases where there appears to be no evidence of physical injury, the only possible violence, so it is argued, would have to be of (merely) psychological nature. Contrary to this view, feminist studies have repeatedly insisted that the focus should not only be on the physical aspects of the violence but also, above all, on the subjective experience of the victim. The latter, I argue, cannot be reduced to just a psychological fact: rather, it is a *lived-bodily* (if not physical) *fact*.

The concept of the experienced body, which plays a significant role in feminist and queer studies, has been used by cognitive scientists to move beyond the all-too-familiar distinction between the physical and the virtual (Piryankova, Wong 2014). Just like biological bodies, virtual bodies are to be seen as lived or experienced bodies, that is, as relational structures through which the horizon of possibilities of each of our actions is revealed. Moreover, if we consider from a phenomenological perspective how embodiment is achieved in immersive virtual environments, we will inevitably conclude that the distinction between physical and virtual bodies should not be interpreted as a binary opposition.

As is well known, David Chalmers (2022) has criticised the reality-virtuality continuum (Milgram *et al.* 1995) as a “misnamed” notion and suggested that it be replaced by another continuum ranging from physicality to virtuality. While I certainly agree that the virtual needs to be conceived of as a reality in its own right, I would like to stress that the extreme poles of the *new* continuum also seem difficult to maintain. In particular, one must admit that even in the most immersive virtual reality experience available today, we cannot do away with our physical body: as Skarbez *et al.* (2021: 2) have demonstrated, perfect, Matrix-like, or, as Chalmers explicitly (2022: 236) defines it, “pure” virtuality cannot be achieved. Indeed, as soon as I put on my headset, I turn into what I propose to call a *somatechnical body*: I feel teleported to the “there” of the virtual world, a

“there” which, however, thanks to first-person perspective tends to become for me another “here” where I meet other people and objects that present themselves to me with equal force. This “here”, in turn, exists *alongside* the “here” of the physical world inhabited by my biological body. This means that, if physical reality is augmented by virtual reality, virtual reality is equally augmented by physical reality:

When extending my attention to phenomena that are not audiovisual, I cannot help but be drawn away from the virtual realm and back to physical reality. Paying attention to my tactile sensations, the physical dominates over the virtual as I shift to describing the feeling of the wrist strap, the controller’s weight and texture in my hands, the weight of the headset on my brow and on the ridge of my nose, the head strap tightly cinched around the base of my skull, and perhaps even the uncanny proximity of the Fresnel lenses to my glasses. I could even expand my field of sensations and attend to the warmth of the headset, the build-up of fog on the lenses obscuring my vision of the virtual world, or the smell of the rubber membrane pressed around my eyes and nose. (Bédard 2023: 66-7)

I maintain that such bodily co-existence – which has been described as a veritable bilocation implying “a true psycho-physical externalisation of the self” (Pinotti 2022) – is key to understanding the specific nature of *virtual rape*.

I would like to illustrate this last point with a personal anecdote. When I started mulling over the news of the girl being gang-raped in the metaverse, a colleague of mine adamantly protested any suggestion that this could be considered psychological violence, insisting that it was unquestionably physical. In support of her argument, she recounted a similar experience she had undergone. After turning her headset on, she entered Horizon Worlds to attend the first Foo Fighters’ metaverse concert. She picked up a female avatar. Almost immediately, she found herself surrounded by a group of male avatars coming closer and closer to her, whispering to, or shouting at her, disturbing her to the point that she felt compelled to leave the virtual environment: “Eventually, I took my headset off”.

It was February 2022. In the same month, Meta introduced a personal boundary system around avatars to limit unwanted interactions and prevent harassment. Interestingly, the company website defines this invisible shield as a *physical* (rather than virtual) barrier⁴. This reminds me

⁴ <https://about.fb.com/news/2022/02/personal-boundary-horizon/> (retrieved February 28, 2024).

of my colleague’s description of her experience in terms of physical violence. In both cases, one might surely object that there was no trace whatsoever of physicality, or that the term was used in a metaphorical sense (which, however, my colleague would certainly disagree with). For my part, I contend that what Meta was trying to describe is a *virtually physical barrier*, that is, a *lived bodily barrier* – a device that works physically within the virtual environment.

Thus, on the one hand, I support the idea that virtual violence in immersive environments cannot be reduced to a purely psychological problem, and I further argue that it cannot even be equated with simply a form of somatisation induced by psychological distress. On the other hand, the lack of evidence of measurable and factually indisputable physical injury must be considered if, as I do believe, a distinction between virtual rape and physical rape is to be retained. After all, if a woman is walking down the street at night and is surrounded by a group of malicious individuals, she has very little chance of escaping. If the same situation occurs in the metaverse as happened to my colleague, she would be able to take her headset off – she would still be in (some) control as to how to face the situation.

This is by no means to say, as should be clear by now, that sexual crimes in immersive virtual worlds are not real violence. Quite on the contrary, I argue that they are real violence and that this violence is *bodily* violence. As I plunge into the artificial environment, I no longer have visual information about my own physical body. Instead, I am receiving visual information about a virtual body. I turn my head, and the image world changes accordingly. I can see other bodies, I can hear their voices. I feel there, and I do perceive a peripersonal space encompassing my virtual body. An invasion of this space by other avatars against my wishes amounts to a form of (virtual) bodily violence, which certainly affects my physical body as well: I start to sweat, my heartbeat quickens dramatically, and I breathe heavily. But then again: I take off my headset. The very possibility of “leaving the stage” is granted by the fact that I am still feeling here, in the physical world, while *at the same time*, I am there in the virtual world. While wearing the headset, I still receive proprioceptive, somatosensory, and memory cues from my physical body which make me *never* forget that I am sitting in my chair or walking around the room of a gallery hosting a virtual reality exhibition.

A phenomenological description of all current virtual reality experiences makes it clear that my physical body is in no way replaced by my virtual body. Rather, it is “re-placed [...] in the imbricated space of sameness *and* difference” (Ng 2021: 131), constantly and often tiresomely merging with my virtual body, thus splitting the deictic spatial centre of my self-orientation. It is precisely this medium-specific “splitting” of the bodily self that makes it impossible both to reduce virtual rape to psychological violence as well as to simplistically equate virtual rape to physical rape.

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