Living the life of The GAME
A LETTER TO THE READERS OF ANALYTIC TEACHING

Gavin J. Fairbairn

D ear readers
of Analytic Teaching:

I am writing this letter in the hope of enlisting your help with a thought experiment I created some years ago as a piece of teaching material. I had been invited to run a philosophical workshop with a group of able 14-1 5 year old pupils, who had had no previous contact with philosophy. In preparing for that workshop I had decided to use some materials I have written to introduce undergraduates in religious and moral studies, to thinking philosophically about moral issues. However, since my remit was to stimulate this group of youngsters in a more general way, I decided to write something new. The GAME was the result.

My intention was to write something with a narrative flavour, easy to read but with sufficient depth to stimulate thought about a range of issues. Looking round in my dustbin of a mind for a topic that might engage the group at whom it was to be aimed, I came across some ideas about the possibilities of virtual reality. I had been playing with these ideas ever since I first heard that computers would soon be able to create 'virtual' worlds in which we could experience all kinds of things that we could not experience otherwise, as well as giving us the opportunity to have all sorts of experiences that we already enjoy, whenever and wherever we wish to enjoy them.

Over the years discussions of developments in virtual reality have informed us about actual and forthcoming possibilities including such delights as virtual sex and more tastefully, from my point of view, of virtual visits to reconstructions of historical places. The GAME represents a kind of fossilised record of my earliest imaginings about where virtual reality might take us in the end. It concerns a virtual reality game that is so powerful that life inside it is, for its players, indistinguish-able from the real thing.

***

THE *GAME*

Suppose that a major computer software company, one that has been dealing in computer games for many years, has come up with a programme and the associated peripherals, for the ultimate virtual reality game. Actually, suppose that this Game is not so much a programme, more a way of life.

Suppose that when those who play this game - or *live* it - put on the helmet and the body suit that is provided and switch on, they immediately begin experiencing their ideal life. Everything that they ever wanted occurs; their every wish is realised. They live, in virtual reality, every experience they would want for themselves, just when they want to do so; they eat and drink what they want when they want, holiday where they want, make friends and spend time with whoever they want to spend time with; they have the opportunity to engage in whatever leisure pursuits they like best and to pursue the career they want to pursue, to live where they want with those that they want to live with, comfortably and easily. And it's not that in the same kind of way as one might experience nice things in a dream, the things that happen are really only visually and emotionally experienced; no, life in The GAME is in every respect just the same as life in the real world.

The world of The GAME is inhabited by tastes and smells and sensations of hot and cold and wet and dry; beautiful things really are beautiful, lovely feelings really are lovely, the touch of one's lover's loving hand really is one's lover's touch and so on, in just the same way in as the real world. Or at any rate, to those living life in The GAME, life is indistinguishable from life outside it, except that in the game they are able to do all the things that they want to do with none of the constraints that act in the everyday physical world. In short, when they enter the virtual reality world of the computer, players have every experience they ever wanted to have in the real world; and what's more, far from its being the case that life in The GAME is qualitatively different from life outside it, it is just the same. In other words, once inside The GAME, players do not know they are there; they are just gloriously contented and happy. Incidentally, I've forgotten to mention that however long the person lives it, The GAME takes virtually no time at all; while players are living lives that may last hours, days, months, years or even lifetimes, virtually no time passes in the external world of everyday, humdrum life. As is the case with C.S. Lewis's Narnia stories, where lucky children go to other worlds and have wonderful adventures, which sometimes last for years, without losing any time in this world (or very little of it at any rate), those who play The GAME gain the life they want, at the expense of very little of the life they have. It sounds wonderful doesn't it?

There is however, one detail of the life of The Game at its current state of development, that I should share, which might count against becoming a player. It is simply that since players do not know, once they have entered The GAME that they have moved out of real life, they cannot decide to abandon it and return to reality. Actually, it's a little worse than that, because the team that took over its development when its originator went noisily mad some years ago, still cannot work out how to control The GAME effectively. As a result the lives that players live in The GAME are liable to be terminated at any point, by which I mean, not that they will die or be killed in The GAME, but that they may at any time and without warning, be returned to their ordinary life outside The GAME - confused and disori-

entated. And so, although it is inevitable that users will at some point cease living the life of The GAME, when this occurs is very much a matter of fate. In other words, at the present time (as of 23rd May, 1997) those who enter The GAME enter a world and a life which can end at any time. This means that if you opt to play, whether as a paying client (and it is very expensive) or as a subject on the research programme as a part of which The GAME is being developed, you could be playing for what seemed like years or you could be playing for only a few hours (in *Game time),* though, of course, the time that would elapse in real time would be virtually the same in all cases. It also means that you could be ejected just as you were doing something particularly enjoyable (I leave it to your imagination to work out what delights you would most hate to leave in mid-event to land with a dull thud in the comfy seat where you first sat down after putting on the helmet and body suit a few short seconds before). In other words though life in The GAME is always enjoyable, at the moment you can never have any control over how long you will enjoy it.

Given what you know about it so far, would this game be one you would want to play? Do you think that when your game time was terminated, you would miss it? What reasons do you have for your answers?

Now consider a possible modification to The GAME. Imagine, in a future version of The GAME, that once you put on the headset and the body suit, and switch on The GAME, you will lose, forever, the possibility of returning to this life - this ordinary everyday, physical life. It might, for example, be the case that transition from The GAME back to real life would put such strain on the body's systems that it would inevitably end in death of the body, or worse. Imagine, in other words, that once you entered the virtual reality world of The GAME, which offered the promise of virtually eternal life - of happiness, fulfilment and pleasure, you were unable to return to this world, that by entering it you traded in your real life. Would you then be willing to become a player? In other words, if you had a choice between living, in virtual reality, a life that you loved all the time because in it you lived and experienced everything that was important and meaningful and pleasurable for you, and the life you live now and will live for the rest of your life, what would you choose? What reasons do you have for your answer?

***

In using The GAME with students, I have either asked them - individually or in groups - to read the text given above, or I have shared the description of The GAME orally. Following this, in both cases, I have discussed reactions to The GAME in both its versions, paying particular attention both to the questions posed above and to a range of other questions such as

• Do you foresee any problems with The GAME? If you can, what kind of problems are they - logical, psychological, practical, moral?

• Can you see any future for the GAME?

• Could The GAME have any practical use - other than as a pastime for those who are rich enough to afford to play?

• Is The GAME a morally good, or a morally bad thing? Or does it stand outside morality alto-gether?

One problem I have had in developing The GAME for teaching, is knowing how much detail to give. The amount given must, in my view, be just enough to interest students without directing their thinking too much. This allows one the freedom either to embark with them on an exploration of issues that strike them immediately as being of interest, or by giving more detail, or changing the storyline, to nudge them towards other topics. I think that in this case I have got it about right and I will support this view below, by sharing some of the ways in which students have responded in discussion. However, before doing so, I should probably share with you some of my own thoughts about issues with which I think The GAME confronts us.

SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT THE GAME

The GAME will allow players to enter into virtual lives in which their desires and tastes and ambitions can be fulfilled at will, as the machine responds to them and creates the conditions in which they can be (virtually) actualised. It won't be real life, of course - however delicious, the food that players eat won't be real food, but virtual food; however beautiful and peaceful, however atmospheric or memo-rable, the places they visit will not be real places. And the things they achieve will not be real achieve-ments. Or at any rate achievements that are physical in nature, won't be real achievements, For ex-ample, a player who runs a marathon in under two hours won't really have run a marathon; one who grows a fine flower garden which gains her international acclaim, will have planted no seeds, and pricked out no seedlings, and will have spent no time watering her treasures and protecting them from the frost; and one who becomes the benevolent President of a totalitarian state will not really have achieved high political office, no matter how fine her achievements in terms of improving the life of her people.

On the other hand, it is less clear that a player whose achievements in the game are of an intellec-tual kind will have achieved nothing - consider, for example, one who in virtual life composes a series of string quartets to rival those of Beethoven or Bartok, or who solves some great riddle in mathematics. The physical correlates of such achievements - the hours sweating over the piano or a pile of manuscript paper, or the presentation of mathematical solutions at academic conferences the world over, would not have happened in the real world. However, the thinking necessary for such creative activities will have gone on in producing the aesthetic or intellectual products in virtual life. In other words, just as the experience of smells and tastes and other physical sensations in The GAME are real rather than imag-ined, the thoughts one has as a player really are the thoughts one takes them to be - and the mathemati-cal solutions at which one arrives and the musical compositions one creates, the plans one lays for all kinds of projects - really will have been thought through and created and laid. And so since the mind of the individual in The GAME and outside it will be the same mind, maybe, just maybe, in the current version of The GAME where return to real, rather than virtual reality, is possible, such a person might be able to bring some part of her achievements in The GAME back to everyday life.

So the world in which life is lived in The GAME is not the real world; the places, the objects and the people, in relation to whom and with whom, life in The GAME is lived, are creations of the computer rather than real, physically existing places and objects and people. Nevertheless, aside from the fact that it is being lived in a virtual rather than an actual world, life in The GAME is identical to life in the real world. The body suit, helmet and other peripheral pieces of equipment (too many to mention and too complex to describe in detail) that are necessary for each player, create for her an experience of the world that is identical to what her experience of a real world would be, in which her opportunities, actions, emotions and interests were the same.

Even in the real world that we currently inhabit (I am assuming for the moment that you are not reading this in a virtual reality world underpinned by something similar to The GAME I am describing in this paper) none of us ever experiences life outside our skin. The things we see, we see in our heads; the things we hear, we hear in our heads; the images of the people with whom we interact, we hold in our heads; even the touch of our lover's loving hand, we experience inside our skin rather than outside it. Isn't this true for all of us? Isn't it true for all of us, all of the time, that we are, in a real sense, forever destined to lives in which we are separate from the world in which we live, and from the people with whom we live?

In other words, life in The GAME is in all important respects except one, identical to life in the physical world. The one really important difference is that while we are living the life of The GAME we will not change anything in the physical world, we will not actually be doing things in the physical world, we will not influence or even be for, anyone else. Life in The GAME will, in real terms, be an isolated one, with no real interactions with other people. And so, faced with the question of whether we would want to be a player in The GAME, perhaps especially in the proposed new version - where there is no way out once we've plugged in and switched on, we will have to decide whether actually making a difference - to other people, to the world, matters to us. Does living a worthwhile life, for us, necessarily involve making a difference? If it does, then we must not enter the GAME. If it does not, The GAME is the life for us.

For my part I find the idea that one day people might be in possession of technology similar to that described in The GAME, which will enable players to experience life as they want it to be, through the use of technology rather than through their own efforts combined with the interventions of Lady Luck, attractive an terrifying by turns. How nice to be able, at time, to take action that will ensure that we wi gain pleasure, comfort, stimulation, excitement in fact any emotion or physical sensation, or psychological state one wishes to enjoy, whenever one wishes to have it, without having to go through the trouble of arranging it physically. But how odd, and in a way dehumanising, to think that one day we may have the possibility of choosing in advance that our experiences will all have a certain character, will all be satisfying, enjoyable, pleasant and fulfilling. It is not that the game will allow us to choose from an encyclopaedic menu of possible human experiences and emotions, the elements of our lives, in the same way as one decides on the elements of a meal, in a restaurant. Nevertheless, it will allow those who choose to enter The GAME as players to choose always to have positive, 'life enhancing' experiences, and to choose to do *virtually,* only things that make life worth living for them. This leads me into a comment about some moral qualms I have about The GAME.

I have ethical doubts about the fact that since it will allow people to live lives that are, for them, full of pleasure, The GAME will facilitate players not only in living lives that are full of experiences of a worthwhile, morally good and aesthetically pleasing kind, but in living lives that are less worthwhile, less morally good and less aesthetically pleasing. And so, for example, and perhaps most importantly, although The GAME will allow people to live virtual lives that are good and full of compassion for their fellow human beings, that add to rather than detract from the sum (in their virtual world) of human happiness, it will also allow them to live lives of unimaginable wickedness, if that is what gives them happiness. I leave it for you to imagine (or to refrain from imagining if it is too horrific to do so) the awful things that might go on in some virtual lives underpinned by The GAME. For the moment I want simply to point out in a general kind of way that players whose predisposition outside The GAME is towards living an immoral or criminal life, will, in The GAME, be able to live lives of virtual immorality and virtual crime, without effective constraints. Of course, in the case of many such individuals there will have to be constraints in The GAME against which they can kick and win, because, for *them,* part of the pleasure will come from doing what should not be done and avoiding getting their just deserts for doing so.

The moral concerns I have outlined are of course, much more significant in relation to the current version of The GAME in which it is still possible to emerge into real life - even though the point at which this occurs is, as I have said, presently uncontrollable. They are more significant here because, of course, any player who has been facilitated in living a wicked virtual life by playing The GAME, will be likely to wish to continue to pursue the life style to which he has become virtually accustomed, when he returns to life in the real world, with real people, when his virtual life is terminated. For this reason, I would be in favour of morally vetting applicants for The GAME and refusing them the opportunity to play the current version if there is reason to believe that playing is likely to make them worse human beings when they return to real life. I would also, as it happens, be in favour of banning those whose morality was suspect, from entry into the proposed modified version of The GAME, but for reasons that are perhaps less well grounded. I invite you to imagine what they might be in detail, and to decide whether they are moral reasons or merely aesthetic ones, since they depend, not on moral objections to actual wickedness, but on objections to virtual wickedness in which no actually existing people are harmed, but only virtual people.

HOW HAVE STUDENTS RESPONDED TO THE *GAME?*

Since writing The GAME I have used it with children between the ages of nine and fifteen, and with undergraduate students on teacher education programmes. Small though it is, I have found that discussion of the imaginary storyline round which it is based, whether it is used in its written form or shared verbally with students, provokes interesting responses so much so that I would like to develop it further. Of course, as might be expected, some students want to discuss the practicalities of the science involved in creating a virtual world in which the experience is so real. For example, some have been concerned about the fact that life in The GAME is almost instantaneous when compared with life in real time. They find it difficult to see how this might be possible. Of course, though the technicalities are complex, at one level the explanation for the way in which this is achieved is simple: it depends both upon making full use of all the possible interconnections between individual cells in the human brain,

and upon connecting these directly to substitute electronic 'brain cells' in the electronic environment to which players are connected.

But though students sometimes express concern with practicalities, most want to discuss The GAME in a deeper way. For example, some have wanted to focus on alleged logical inconsistencies in the scenarios I describe (and there are lots); some have wanted to raise issues of a psychological kind, and some have raised ethical issues that it throws up.

Perhaps the most interesting responses have come from undergraduate students specialising in religious and moral education, though similar issues have also been raised by school pupils as young as nine years of age. Among other things they have suggested various uses for The GAME - including the possibility that it might both offer a permanent solution to the problems of depressed and suicidal people, and a way of punishing the perpetrators of terrible crimes (though this would require some modifications, such that The GAME offered, not a life of pleasure, but a series of awful experiences - making it a kind of virtual Hell).

One student talked about the possibility that participation in The GAME could be offered to people who are severely physically disabled following accidents and who find the physical restrictions with which they are now living, frustrating. Being a thoughtful student with one eye on what's politically correct, he was careful to point out that he didn't wish in making his suggestion, to imply that all disabled people have bad lives. Being a bright student, he also pointed out his belief that this solution would work in the case of disabled people whose disability was congenital in origin - unless, that is, the system underpinning The GAME was modified so that players could be fed experiences that did not depend upon previously lived real life experiences. I think he was right to be concerned about the possibility that he might be viewed as somehow denigrating disabled people. However, he was wrong in his second comment because The GAME as I have conceived it, will not depend upon previously lived experiences alone, but on all sorts of aspirations and desires both in relation to previously experienced experiences and in relation to experiences that have not entered into the life of the protagonist except in imagination. And so, for example, a person with a congenital disability which prevented him speaking might find, in virtual reality, that he had a voice as beautiful as any classically trained actor; and one who could not stand, far less run, might find himself setting world records on the race track. Not only that, but if were I to want it enough, playing The GAME could both be the answer to my desire to be a world class golfer and to my desire to have this article published in *Analytic Teaching,* even though the world of golf outside The GAME might never hear of me and *Analytic Teaching* outside The GAME may never publish this article. (On the other hand, the fact that you are reading this in *Analytic Teaching* either means that you're part of my virtual world, or that *Analytic Teaching* really has published it).

Finally, my moral studies students have talked about the possible use of The GAME as a way of coping with the world-wide population explosion. Briefly, the suggestion here was that the population should be culled - according, naturally, to some morally arrived at formula (they were, after all students undertaking a course in moral education), and that The GAME should be used to

compensate those who are to die by giving them an entire virtual lifetime of virtual pleasure before they meet their actual, physical fate. Interestingly a colleague has suggested a related use - allowing childless people to have virtual children. This suggestion, though interesting, seems to ignore the fact that most (though not all) of those wish to be parents, want to share parenthood with a partner that they know and love, and a virtual child would not be shared with this partner. On the other hand, the fact that in virtual life a child might be shared with a virtual representation of the real life partner with whom they want to become co-parents, might be enough for some people.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Unfortunately, given my current job description, my opportunities for working with groups in relation to whom The GAME might realistically be thought appropriate, are quite limited and so I am looking for help in thinking of ways in which I can modify or elaborate it. This brings me back to where I began. I would be very pleased if anyone who thought it might be entertaining, were to use The GAME with students - of whatever age, and of whatever subject, and let me know something about the ways in which students respond. Alternatively, you might care simply to share your own response to the material without even trying it out on students. For example, I'd be interested to hear about ways in which I might develop The GAME further - about mistakes I have made in imagining or discussing it, and about moral, theological or logical problems it suggests.

I can already hear critics muttering about the similarity between The GAME and a number of thought experiments proposed by others - including, Nozick's 'Experience Machine' in *Anarchy, State and Utopia (1974)* and Jonathan Glover's 'Dream Machine' in *What kind* of *people should there he? (1983)'* Both have some overlap with my GAME though I have spelled out details of The GAME in somewhat more detail than Glover and Nozick have outlined the dream machine and the experience machine, and we each have different reasons for inventing the technological wizardry that we propose. This is not the right place to go into a detailed analysis of similarities and differences between my invention and those of Nozick and Glover, though there are clear differences. In any case, I am not claiming any originality for the philosophical ideas that may be thought to underpin The GAME. I am simply inviting responses to what I have written as a piece of teaching material.

NOTE

1. Although I had heard of Glover's Dream Machine many years ago, I did not reflect on the similarities between my proposal and his until I had finished writing The GAME, though I recognise the possibility that at a subliminal level, at any rate, I have drawn on his ideas. And it was not until I was attempting, for the sake of scholarship, to trace whether there might have been any other influences of which I was unaware, that Nozick's Experience Machine was brought to my attention by a colleague. (Lesser, 1997).

REFERENCES

Glover, J. (1981) *What sort* of *people should there be?* Harmondsworth, Penguin.

Lesser, H. (1997) *Personal communication.*

Lewis, C. S. (1996, Diamond Books edition)The *Chronicles of Narnia,* London, Diamond Books.

Nozick, R. (1974) *Anarchy, State and Utopia,* Oxford, Basil Blackwell.

Address correspondence to:
Dr Gavin J. Fairbaim
Reader in Education
NEWI, Plas Coch
Mold Road, Wrecsam