2007

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Robert Nozick's "Experience Machine" thought experiment is a central idea in the debate over psychological hedonism. Nozick (1974) suggests a machine that creates a simulated reality inside a person's mind. The machine "would give you any experience you desired," while all the time "you would be floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to your brain" (43). The machine would also make a person forget plugging into it, so that anyone who plugs in would think the simulated reality was real. Nozick then asks whether the reader would plug into the machine for life, knowing that the machine would provide as much pleasure as the reader could possibly want.

Nozick intended his machine to be a refutation of psychological hedonism. Since most people would feel some reluctance to plug into the machine, there must be something more that we desire from life than the unending pleasure the machine could provide.

What that "something" is has been left up to the readers' imaginations for more than thirty years. For Nozick's purpose, the reasons why we would not plug into the Experience Machine are not important as long as they are not dependent on maximizing personal pleasure and minimizing personal pain.

But the reasons why people will not plug in become more important when we are forced to take into consideration that people have, for

the past seven years, been plugging into the best approximation of Nozick's Experience Machine we have available. When *Everquest*, the first largely successful 3-dimensional massively-multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG), went live in 1999, it began a trend of people flocking to alternate reality simulations. By 2006, MMORPG's have become the biggest money-maker in gaming with the most persistent player-base, and with players numbering in the millions in a half-dozen leading MMO games.

The success of the MMO industry is all well and good. However, what gives Nozick and contemporary philosophers cause for consideration is that MMORPG's are closer in essence to the Experience Machine than they are to traditional games. These games offer persistent, immersive (though not sensory-immersive) worlds, and people sign onto them specifically for pleasure. And whatever the reasons why they wouldn't spend their whole lives in the Experience Machine, the players of MMORPG's are spending significant portions of their lives in game. Millions of people ages ten and up are sacrificing free time, conventional social interaction, television, other games, work, school, friends, family, and (in extreme cases) eating for these games.

Were these games to be sensory immersive – that is, to allow the players to perceive the fictional reality as if it were real – there is little doubt that the MMORPG players of today would jump at the chance to adventure in such a world. With a contemporary example of people's willingness to forgo actual reality for its virtual counterpart, we must read-dress the Experience Machine and our reasons for refusing to plug in. What are the differences between MMO games, and the Experience Machine? Despite their differences, does pleasure remain the purpose of both? If so, is it possible for a case to be made that an MMO game actually provides more pleasure for the user?

As we begin to take a look at these issues, it is important first to note a distinction that has been made in debate over how we might hedonistically consider whether to plug into the Experience Machine. The arguments offered in this paper will not rely on this distinction, but it remains important because it is the mind of the person who is considering whether or not to plug in that we are interested in.

i. The Decision

Recent controversy over the Experience Machine and psychological hedonism centers on arguments presented by Elliot Sober and David Sloan Wilson (1998) in *Unto Other: The Evolution and Biology of Unselfish Behavior*. They assert that "quite apart from the amount of

pleasure and pain that accrues to subject after they decide [whether to plug in or not], there is a level of pleasure and pain arising from the deliberation process itself" (285). Sober (2000) later elaborates on this further in *The Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory*, claiming that "Plugging into the machine resembles suicide in terms of the utter separation it effects with the real world." However, unlike suicide, "the experience machine delivers (literally) escapist pleasures" (139).

The argument that the decision to plug into the Experience Machine must be considered apart from the experience that the user would have inside the machine has fallen under scrutiny. The purpose of this paper is neither to attack nor to defend this argument. However, as we are looking at what people who are considering plugging into the machine consider important, the notion of game-assisted suicide must factor in.

ii. Games vs. the Experience Machine

The manifest purpose of both playing games and entering the Experience Machine is pleasure. However, Nozick and the people who create MMO games do some very different things when they go about designing their hedonistic devices. Looking at these differences will perhaps give us some insight into why we like MMO games, but generally feel some reservations about Nozick's Experience Machine:

Persistent world beats instanced world every time.

There is an in-joke in the gaming community in which, when describing someone of surpassing skill (at anything), we will claim that this person beat *Tetris*. This is a joke because the game is un-winnable and will go on forever if a player is skilled enough. However, no matter what kind of recognition a person could earn for the feat (gamer godhood, really), it is difficult to imagine anyone playing *Tetris* for the rest of her life. There is an important similarity, though, between an unending game of *Tetris* and Robert Nozick's Experience Machine.

When a person sits down to play *Tetris*, the world which she will occupy for the duration of the game is created for her. Without her, the world would not exist, and when she stops playing, the world ends. In gaming, we refer to this as instancing. All single player games are instanced, as is Nozick's Experience Machine.

There are limitations that we associate with instanced games. Anything instanced is necessarily static, since by the time that we see a game, it is complete. We assume that the designers who created it must

stop work on a product before it can be made available for use. This is not strictly true, and in the case of Nozick's Experience Machine, a static play experience would be impossible (as variety is necessary for pleasure).

The underlying assumption that Nozick makes when he proposes his Experience Machine is that it will be controlled by an Artificial Intelligence. This is the only way to accomplish a dynamic instanced play experience without devoting a team of people to creating content, full-time for each person using the machine. An AI may seem like an easy thing to assume in this case, but we must consider that Nozick is now not only positing a machine that provides pleasure, but also a completely alien intelligence that we know next to nothing about. Further, we now have to consider every bias we have developed for and against thinking machines, and everything that we know, think we know, and know we don't know about AI. That's a lot of extra baggage to throw into something that used to be as simple as a pleasure machine. And we haven't even considered our feelings about a machine simulating people.

All of these issues are resolved in MMO games with persistent worlds. A persistent world allows multiple users to interact with each other in an environment that exists independently of any individual. By allowing other users into one simulated environment, we create a scenario where a comparatively small team of developers can create dynamic content for the game. Further, the other players themselves provide dynamic interactions that make the play experience more pleasurable.

Using only the technology of today, and only entities we are capable of understanding, we can create a simulated environment that exists for the purpose of pleasure and that people will willingly take part in.

There are other problems that we are faced with when considering whether to plug into Nozick's Experience Machine. We'll now look at the problem of legacy, and see how games with persistent worlds help resolve this as well.

We really like people – maybe even need them –
and definitely want them to know what we're doing.

Among the reasons that people most often give when they justify refusing Nozick's Experience Machine is that they want what they do with their lives to have some impact, or tangible effect on the world. What cause does the rest of the world have to look at the actions of a person plugged into Nozick's Experience Machine? Apart from entertainment ("MTV's The Fake World"), there aren't very many reasons to do so. The purpose of Nozick's Experience Machine is to provide a person who enters

it with the maximum pleasure and the minimum pain. While it may seem as if we could minimize pain by simulating human interaction, it is that interaction that is our greatest source of pleasure. As social creatures, the greatest pleasure that could possibly be provided to us would be in allowing the people who are using the machine to interact with each other. We could then maintain the purposes that we derive for ourselves and achieve some personal recognition in doing so. We can maintain a potential for legacy. If we do this, we will start to see a significant number of people who willingly enter the machine.

Recognition isn't the only type of legacy that we find pleasurable. By entering into the machine, a person would be sacrificing any reproductive potential. From the perspective of someone outside the machine, two offspring who will continue to exist after that person dies offers significantly more pleasure than two kids who the Experience Machine will eventually just turn off.

The problem of reproductive legacy is somewhat more complicated to solve, because it requires us to address deception.

What's it like to have a memory forcibly removed?

Nozick's Experience Machine doesn't strike us as a particularly friendly device. Upon plugging in, we are forced to forget anything we know about the real world and are deceived into believing the computer-generated world is real. The machine severs our link with anything that we have been or done in the real world in the interest of providing us pleasure in the fake one.

On the matter of memory alteration, Nozick is being a little unfair. None of us have ever had a memory removed (or at least don't remember it if we have). Further, the prospect of being forcibly parted with our memories seems more than a bit unpleasant, since we base so much of who we are off of our experience. Because of this, when Nozick asks if we would forgo the real world for a more pleasurable fake one, what we instead hear is "Would you forgo being a person for a happiness that it is impossible for you to comprehend?" We say no, and we say no hedonistically.

However, were the machine not to deceive, it would seem that the amount of pleasure it could provide us would be limited. People who plug into the machine would take with them whatever burdens they bring from the real world. Further, the content of the simulated world would always be under scrutiny, since it can be compared to its real life counterpart.

What we often overlook is that the primary reason for entering the

Experience Machine is to be able to have the experiences we couldn't have in real life. If the machine forces us to think that the computer-generated world is real, then our fear of consequences will continue to limit the experiences we will have in the machine.

Further, the machine deceives because it seems that people using the machine would gain greater pleasure if they thought their accomplishments, recognition and legacy were real. The counter to this is obvious to any gamer. Accomplishment in game is real accomplishment. When a basketball team wins a game, its members have done something they can be proud of. The fact that the environment in which they had their success was artificially constructed makes little difference. And, like with a well-known basketball team, there is similar opportunity for recognition amongst those interested. MMORPG players generally know who the best players on their server are, or at least the name of an elite organization. Without deception, the potential for accomplishment is preserved.

Further, without deception, users who would plug into the Experience Machine would retain the pleasure granted them by knowing that they could leave the machine. Users can maintain reproductive potential, and be free to enter the machine without regard for preservation of their personal genes or of the species at large. Moreover, having the memory of an often unpleasant, unforgiving world outside the machine would allow users to know just how pleasurable an experience they are having inside (is pleasure really pleasure if you don't know how pleasurable it is?). The knowledge that players are free to leave the real world for the machine and vice versa would likely go a long way toward alleviating the feeling of being trapped or limited that we often encounter in everyday life. And people who know that they can leave the machine are that much more likely to remain inside it willingly. MMO players don't have to spend every second of their available time in game. They know that they do not. They do it anyway, because they want to.

iii. Fun, Games and Conclusions

MMORPG's and their future incarnations (visual internet community, virtual reality, sensory immersion) address the problems that we have with Nozick's Experience Machine. They take into account that people really do derive pleasure from interacting with other people. They do not deceive users (apart from the willing suspension of disbelief that any fiction requires). They allow users freedom to act in ways that survival instinct, the physical world and society prohibit. They exist for the purpose of pleasure and they are seeing plenty of use.

When we closely examine Nozick's Experience Machine with

regard for what these video games are doing differently, we begin to notice some assumptions Nozick makes that limit the amount of pleasure we could get from the machine. A static play experience for Experience Machine users would produce only limited pleasure. A dynamic experience controlled by an AI brings into play all the philosophical baggage that any discussion of AI requires. We derive pleasure from interaction with other people, yet the Experience Machine forbids this. We do not like being deceived, and we have no idea what it's like to have a memory taken from us, but it certainly doesn't seem pleasant.

Robert Nozick asked us to conceive of a device that would cause us the maximum pleasure and the minimum pain. But the device he outlined as his Experience Machine is not that device. Nozick instead created a device that was, by its very nature, unpleasant and difficult to understand. Yet, we understand games, we like them just fine. In a time when more people than ever are turning to games as a source of pleasure and those people are devoting more of their lives to the games, we must reconsider what we thought we learned from the Experience Machine. Psychological hedonism may not be a complete account for human motivation but, for gamers at least, it is a notion that cannot be so easily pushed aside.

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