

# Integrating Poor Taste into the Ongoing Debate on the Morality of Violent Video Games

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Received: 2 August 2017 / Accepted: 31 August 2017  
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**Abstract** This paper considers the implications of a recent change to the direction of our moral scrutiny of video game content: away from moral assessment based on some form of ‘contamination’ towards a position in which the morality of a video game is determined by the worldview (allegedly) endorsed by the gameplay taken as a whole. It is my contention that, given the nature of video game enactments (i.e., simulations involving make-believe), this switch of focus requires a degree of interpretation characteristic of judgements of poor taste. Because of this, with the exception of rare cases, the force of moral condemnation levelled at putatively immoral gameplays is weakened to the point where, typically, one would find it hard to justify a moral *obligation* not to permit the gameplay. In defence of this claim, I draw attention to the potential problems facing a moral account based on the interpretation of the worldview contained within a gameplay, even when taken as a whole.

**Keywords** Contamination thesis · Offence · Endorsing and trivializing immorality · Suberogatory · Moral obligation

## 1 Introduction

In a recent paper on the morality of video game violence, Michael Goerger (drawing from Coecklebergh 2007) introduces the *contamination thesis* as a means of capturing what he takes to be a common feature of several arguments countenancing the immorality of violent video games (Goerger 2017). In essence, the

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contamination thesis postulates that video game content is immoral *if* it contaminates real-world interactions (making ‘contamination’ sufficient for moral prohibition). The contamination thesis aligns itself perhaps most obviously with the utilitarian approach to morality, at least where the simulation of virtual violence is said to contaminate (as in, have a detrimental effect on) our interactions with others outside of the gaming environment, thereby increasing negative utility (say, in the form of increased harm; see Young 2013). But, equally, those who apply virtue theory to video game content (McCormick 2001) also imply a form of contamination. Here, the simulation of virtual violence (or other ‘vices’) is believed to corrupt, through practice, one’s moral character such that it has a negative impact on one’s real-world social interactions. Patridge (2011) refers to this approach as *virtue consequentialism*. Those who draw on Hume and Kant also fall back on real-world consequences. Wonderly (2008), for example, argues that simulating certain types of violence has the potential to reduce our ability to empathize: something which, according to Hume, is essential for moral judgement (see also Coecklebergh 2007). Proponents of a Kantian approach, cite (among other things) Kant’s objection to animal cruelty. The cultivation of cruelty towards animals is something Kant cautions us against; not because we have a moral duty towards animals (according to Kant, we do not) but because it is likely to impede our ability to do our duty to others. According to McCormick (2001) and Waddington (2007), the simulation of video game violence risks this same cultivation of cruelty. Therefore, as a *consequence* of repeated exposure to virtual violence, we are likely to become less willing and/or able to carry out our moral duty to others.

Because of the consequentialist nature of each of these positions, at least when applied to video game content, one might be tempted to think that whether they stand or fall is dependent on the empirical support they receive. It is worth noting, however, that in addition to *inconclusive* empirical support for the contamination thesis—in any of its guises—critics have been quick to point out potential interpretative and conceptual problems with the application of these traditional moral approaches to gamespace (Schulzke 2010; Young 2013). Goerger’s (2017) shares this scepticism, claiming that the contamination thesis (and therefore approaches that are grounded on it) is “empirically and philosophically problematic” (p. 95). But Goerger is quick to add that the rejection of the contamination thesis does not necessitate that all video game content is morally unproblematic. What he does reject is the idea that there is something intrinsically immoral about such content (a similar view is expressed in several recent publications on violent video game content (see for example Ali 2015; Bartel 2015; Ostritsch 2017; Young 2014, 2015a). Instead, Goerger argues that “violent video games should be evaluated on the basis of the *values expressed* in the game rather than on the basis of perceived harms or violent imagery (2017, p. 103; emphasis added). A similar position is presented by Ostritsch (2017) when he states: “if a game endorses a certain worldview, it can rightly be subjected to moral evaluation” (p. 118). The focus of Goerger’s and Ostritsch’s moral scrutiny is the meaning/value/worldview (hereafter, ‘worldview’) of the video game content. Importantly, though, this should not be assessed on the basis of isolated plays within the game but, as Ostritsch makes clear, on the worldview endorsed by the gameplay taken *as a whole*.

If we want to talk about the moral character of a game or a certain piece of gameplay, i.e., find out its moral meaning, we must take a look at the game in its *entirety* instead of just going by the (seemingly) morally offensive nature of an isolated representation. (p. 124; emphasis added).

This aim of this paper is to consider the implications of the recent change to the direction of our moral scrutiny of video game content, which has moved away from moral assessment based on some form of ‘contamination’—with its consequentialist leanings and dependence on empirical support—towards an a priori position in which the morality of a video game is determined by the worldview (allegedly) found within, and importantly endorsed by, the gameplay. The paper therefore has a narrow focus, and deliberately so. Not because I consider an examination of the worldviews espoused by video games to be the only worthwhile means of establishing their moral status and therefore the only approach one should scrutinize, philosophically, but, rather, because I believe that this relatively recent switch in focus brings with it its own problems. It is problematic for at least the following reasons: (1) given the nature of video game enactments (i.e., which necessarily involve *make-believe*), examining the worldview of video games seems to involve a degree of interpretation akin to those required for judgements of poor taste. Because of this (2) with the exception of rare cases (mentioned below), the force of condemnation levelled at putatively immoral gameplays is weakened—from immorality to poor taste or what I will later refer to a *suberogatory* action—to the point where one would typically find it hard to justify any moral obligation not to permit the gameplay.

To be clear, I am not seeking to champion the contamination thesis. Instead, as part of a larger project concerned with the relationship between immorality and poor taste (which the need for brevity prevents me from discussing in detail here), I seek to identify potential problems with a moral account based on the interpretation of the worldview contained within a gameplay, even when taken as a whole. I do this to show that such an account is not robust enough on its own to act as the arbiter of video game morality and so cannot be employed in isolation from (and therefore irrespective of) other approaches to morality. I say this without seeking to promote any other approach to morality in particular.

## 2 Endorsing the Immoral

I take as a given the view that endorsing the immoral is itself an immoral thing to do. Thus, where  $x$  endorses the immoral—i.e., encourages us (*inter alia*) to delight in actual murder or rape or paedophilia (that is, find these enjoyable), or even delight in the *idea* of any of these acts—then  $x$  is immoral. As such, a video game designed by white supremacists in which one gains points for the murder of non-whites and/or other minorities and perhaps even loses points for the same act perpetrated against white, ‘Christian’ heterosexuals would meet this criterion (*Ethnic Cleansing* is a strong candidate for a video game that endorses just such an immoral worldview; see Left 2002). Where there is little doubt that the actual values

of white supremacist (or any other immoral worldview) are being promoted through the gameplay then the gameplay is immoral: for the creators of the gameplay cannot, through the gameplay, seek only to make-believe the truth of that which they believe to be true (i.e., I cannot create a gameplay in which *I make-believe*, and subsequently invite others to make-believe the inferiority of Jewish people, for example, while simultaneously *believing* this to be the case; see Young 2015b). Here, my actual belief would transcend the space between real and fictional realms such that this belief would be endorsed within and therefore transmitted through the otherwise fictional gameplay.

There is, of course, an important difference between holding that  $x$  is immoral because it endorses an immoral worldview and the claim that  $x$  is immoral because one interprets it in a way that leads one to believe that it is endorsing this view. This difference is highlighted below when one compares statements 1–3 with (a)–(c).

1.  $x$  is immoral if  $x$  endorses an immoral worldview (ontological claim)
2.  $x$  endorses an immoral worldview (ontological claim)
3.  $x$  is immoral (ontological claim)
  - (a)  $x$  is immoral if  $x$  endorses an immoral worldview (ontological claim)
  - (b) (given  $S$ 's interpretation of  $x$ )  $S$  believes that  $x$  is endorsing an immoral worldview (epistemic claim)
  - (c)  $x$  is immoral (ontological claim).

With statements 1–3, the ontological conclusion arrived at in 3 is sound because it is based on ontological premises. Given 1 and 2, 3 must follow. In contrast, the conclusion in (c) does not follow, necessarily, from premises (a) and (b) because premise (b) is a claim which describes a particular epistemic relationship and an ontological conclusion cannot be deduced from an epistemic premise. Given this, if one accepts the truth of premise (a), then the extent to which one is prepared to defend the conclusion in (c), given that it cannot be deduced from (a) and (b), depends on how much one can justify one's interpretation and subsequent belief that  $x$  endorses an immoral worldview (as described in b).

To illustrate the potential difficulty with justifying premise (b), consider the difference between Ostritsch's and Goerger's respective view of *Grand Theft Auto V* (hereafter, GTA). Recall that both authors argue for the importance of scrutinizing a video game's worldview to determine whether it is endorsing the immoral. About GTA, Ostritsch has the following to say:

[It] is the representation of an immoral world. However, it would be wrong to infer from this that the game is also the endorsement of such an immoral world. Rather, anyone who has actually played the game will attest to its dominant satirical character... [T]he world of *GTA V* can easily be identified as a satirically exaggerated version of our world, the real one. But as satire *GTA V* does not endorse what it portrays, rather it ridicules it. (2017, pp. 123–124).

Goerger, acknowledges the ‘satirical defence’ presented by Ostritsch (and others), but uses it only to support his argument that the focus of moral scrutiny should not be on the violent imagery per se but, rather, the values espoused within the gameplay (even if one disagrees with the claim that the gameplay is a satire). In contrast to Ostritsch, then, Goerger holds that “there are good reasons for thinking that *GTA* is a morally problematic game, even if we set aside concerns about violent imagery” (2017, p. 102). Goerger attempts to justify this claim as follows:

The game not only depicts drug and gang related violence, but it presents that violence in a largely consequence free environment... A player thus derives entertainment from, and almost laughs at, the depiction of violence that impacts real lives... Players are, essentially, being entertained by the misery of others and are thus disrespecting objects of value... When... these considerations are brought together, they provide ample reason to think that deriving amusement from *GTA* reveals a defect of character. The game’s values are either not aligned with what merits respect or they fail to manifest themselves (*ibid.*).

Goerger considers *GTA* to be morally problematic because (he claims) it encourages gamers to find the real-life immorality represented within the gameplays amusing. In other words, as a result of what is afforded within the gameplay, one is encouraged to be entertained by the misery of others. In essence, there is a lack of respect for moral values, or this respect fails to manifest itself through typical interactions. For Ostritsch, what is being ridiculed within the game is not our set of moral values, or those who have actually suffered in ways represented within the game—it therefore does not endorse a morally inverse worldview in which inflicting unnecessary suffering (etc.) is said to be good and even amusing—rather, it ridicules a society in which the type of immorality represented *is* typically consumed as entertainment.

Ostritsch and Goerger differ with regard to what they believe is the object of ridicule, and therefore fun and entertaining, within the gameplay. For Ostritsch, what is being ridiculed is society’s hypocritical approach to immorality (in so far as it seeks to condemn immoral acts while also being entertained by representations of them). For Goerger, it is our moral values that are being ridiculed directly and therefore disrespected as a result of the *trivializing* of immorality through the gameplay, to the point where we are encouraged to find the suffering of others funny/entertaining. Goerger further argues that *GTA* is morally problematic for the same reasons as “off-colour” humour (i.e., finding a joke about rape amusing) is immoral (in his view).

[O]ne reason why off-color humor is problematic is because laughing at a rape joke reveals that the agent incorrectly values the experiences of those who have survived sexual assault. That is to say that it fails to take sexual violence seriously. Many other jokes and the stereotypes they trade on are similarly problematic because they disrespect the experiences and struggles of those whom they target...If one fails to value things that ought to be valued, one makes a mistake that can be morally criticized (Groeger 2017, pp. 100–101).

Both authors have different views about the same gaming content: about the values espoused and therefore the morality of the gameplay. Which view, if any, is the correct one? It is my contention that incorrectly valuing the experiences of certain people—e.g., victims of rape, minority groups—is not necessarily the same as (*qua* not necessarily correlated with) endorsing their inferior moral status. There is a difference, I would argue, between trivializing the experiences of a victim of immorality (i.e., someone murdered or sexually assaulted or subject to racial discrimination) and endorsing the view that such immorality is appropriate. To illustrate, if I endorse murder and commend others to delight in it (*qua* find it enjoyable) or at least the idea of it, then I cannot at the same time hold (sincerely) that murder is morally wrong (and, by this, I do not mean that I fail to recognize that others consider it to be wrong). If, on the other hand, I am guilty of trivializing murder, even in what some might consider to be an amusing way—i.e., imagine I created (what is in fact a genuine) advertisement for liquid soap in which a blooded arm is depicted in the foreground of a murder victim prostrate on the floor with a knife in his chest, accompanied by an image of the product alongside the caption “when ordinary soap just won’t do”—then this is something I could have done without seeking to endorse the merits of actual murder.

How this differs from amusement elicited by off-colour humour is nicely explained by Woodcock (2015) who argues that the telling of racist or other immoral jokes “often involves a sense of community involvement that is predicated on the identification with others who belong to one’s in-group and the alienation of members of a targeted out-group” (p. 210). Moreover, those who tell or are amused by such jokes are likely not to find the racism (etc.) immoral, but instead see it as a means of reinforcing the views of the in-group and highlight their disparity with the out-group. Thus, racists (for example) “find no small amount of amusement in the fact that they are part of an inside joke that celebrates membership in a group with attitudes that are resented by non-members (*ibid.*, pp. 210–211). Again, this can be contrasted with an example in which I trivialize rather than endorse historical racism. Imagine, for example, I create a Tetris-style game element that allowed players to pack variously shaped African slaves into a slave transportation vessel (an actual game element that was later removed after protests; Machkovech 2015), under the misguided belief that I was highlighting the cruelty of the slave trade, then I would rightly be accused (in my opinion) of poor taste but not of immorality.

In light of the discussion thus far, it seems reasonable to hold that, even if one fails to recognize and therefore accept the satire others (i.e., Ostritsch) say is indicative of GTA (i.e., directed at society’s Janus-faced attitude towards immorality, rather than moral values per se), the alternative is not necessarily that GTA is endorsing immorality, as I hope the Tetris gaming example and soap advertisement illustrate). One could proffer the view that GTA is trivializing various forms of immorality rather than endorsing them, and, as a consequence, any enjoyment elicited is not an expression of an immoral in-group’s disdain for the traditional moral values they (virtually) flout within the gameplay. Instead, it is my contention that particular ways of *treating* immoral actions/events, including victims (direct or indirect)—such as (*inter alia*) trivializing these actions/events/victims is a characteristic of poor taste rather than immorality. Saying this, however,

does not negate claims for prohibition, although it does limit the moral authority by which one might wish to enforce the prohibition (a point I will return to).

### 3 The Case for Poor Taste

It is my contention that the *sine qua non* of poor taste is offensiveness. Therefore, where S declares “ $x$  is in poor taste”, the reason  $x$  constitutes poor taste ( $P_t$ ), at least for S—*qua* that which S considers to be in poor taste—is because it offends S. Saying this, however, does not restrict offence exclusively to the domain of poor taste. One might find someone’s insulting outburst (for example) offensive without judging it to be in poor taste (Archard 2014). To be clear, then, if S holds that  $x$  is in poor taste then necessarily S finds  $x$  offensive. But S could find  $x$  offensive without believing that it is in poor taste. What is important to note is that where one does consider  $x$  to be in poor taste—and therefore in order to declare (sincerely) that “ $x$  constitutes  $P_t$ ”—one must do so because one believes that  $x$  realizes a property (or properties) one disapproves of (*qua* finds offensive). Let us call this property, O. Where one finds  $x$  to be in poor taste, in virtue of the belief that  $x$  realizes O, one is not describing an inherent property of  $x$  (i.e., its offensiveness); rather, one is expressing a negative attitude towards  $x$ .

In the case of GTA, it would not be unreasonable to say that some of the virtual enactments afforded by the gameplay have offended people (Langton 2017). But such offence is not necessarily indicative of immorality; rather, it could well be that the person offended has a negative attitude towards GTA (or some aspect of it, call it  $x$ ) because they believe that  $x$  realizes O which, in the case of poor taste, could be because they believe it demeans or trivializes or acts irreverently towards or otherwise ridicules that which they believe *is* immoral (including the victims of immorality) rather than endorses it. Moreover, one could argue that, typically, declaring “ $x$  is in poor taste” intimates (i.e., is a way of indirectly expressing one’s view) that  $x$  ought not to be done. Importantly, though, there are a number of acts that I or even society might declare ought not to be done that are not immoral, meaning one is not morally obliged not to do them.

Driver (1992) coined the term *suberogatory* to refer to actions that one is not morally obliged not to perform but which would nevertheless be considered blameworthy for performing. To illustrate, Driver asks us to imagine three people visiting a cinema in which there are only three remaining seats: two seats together and a single. The group comprise a couple and a single person, S. S enters first, knowing the couple are behind. S takes one of the seats that are together, meaning that the couple will have to sit apart (which they would prefer not to do). S is aware of this but does not wish to move. Driver makes the point that S is within his rights to sit in any of the available seats and is therefore not obliged to move: he has not done something that is morally prohibited; yet it seems reasonable to say S’s action is wrong in some sense. While this is not an example of poor taste, my point is that one might reasonable conjecture that poor taste fits within the category of ‘blameworthy action’ Driver has identified as suberogatory. To return to the Tetris example involving the slave ship mode of play: given that the intention was to

convey the horrors of slave transportation, it is not something one should be morally obliged not to illustrate; nevertheless, the manner in which it was done—as a puzzle game—is perhaps worthy of blame and prohibition, which accords well with a judgement of poor taste.

Given that we have a potential new category of blameworthy action, recall how earlier I argued that the conclusion in (c) (below) did not necessarily follow from premises (a) and (b) owing to the epistemic rather than ontological character of premise (b).

- (a)  $x$  is immoral if  $x$  endorses an immoral worldview (ontological claim)
- (b) (given  $S$ 's interpretation of  $x$ )  $S$  believes that  $x$  is endorsing an immoral worldview (epistemic claim)
- (c)  $x$  is immoral (ontological claim).

Within GTA, if one interprets the gameplay to be (for example) trivializing rather than endorsing immorality for the reason discussed then numerous virtual acts—e.g., murdering a prostitute whose services one has just paid for and ‘enjoyed’, or various other random or even co-ordinated acts of violence (call these  $x_1, x_2, x_3, \dots, x_n$ )—are likely to be interpreted in the same manner (making the whole equal to the sum of its parts). I say ‘likely’ because one may still find reason to interpret certain isolated enactments in a manner that leads to the belief *that* (whatever ‘that’ happens to be) is immoral. But where this contrasts with the general interpretation of the gameplay as not immoral, even if it is in poor taste, it will not result in the gameplay overall being condemned as immoral. Consider, for example, the *COD: Modern Warfare 2*'s airport massacre scene which was accused of “trivializing terrorism” (Revoir 2009, p. 1). I have argued that such an action (i.e., trivializing or acting irreverently towards the immoral, and so on) makes it liable to accusations of poor taste; yet for others the scene may be interpreted as endorsing immorality, even if the gameplay as a whole is not.

The point I am making, then, is that if one focuses on the worldview of a gameplay as a means of judging its moral credentials, as recent authors have tried to do, then not only is it erroneous to divide the worldview constitutive of these gameplays into two exhaustive categories (moral and immoral), because they are not exhaustive if one is to embrace suberogatory action, but also one's *interpretation* of the worldview of these gameplays will quite possibly differ from others, as demonstrated by Goerger and Ostritsch's respective take on GTA.

I will finish by mentioning two further games discussed by Ostritsch in his 2017 paper: *RapeLay* (in which the protagonist stalks, sexually assaults and rapes women) and *Hatred* (where one's goal is to engage in the mass shooting and killing of unarmed civilians, including brutal executions). Ostritsch is adamant that each of these gameplays endorses an immoral worldview and is therefore immoral. It is worth noting, however, that Ostritsch does not claim that someone who plays these games is necessarily doing something immoral: that depends, Ostritsch argues, on one's level of enjoyment. The focus of this paper, however, has been on the worldview (allegedly) espoused by the gameplay itself and not player motivation/enjoyment (see Young in press, for a recent discussion on this issue). Focusing on



the worldview, do the gameplays of *RapeLay* and *Hatred* (when taken as a whole) endorse immorality? That is, do they promote or in any way glorify actual rape or murder, or encourage us to delight in the idea of either? If you think they do, then you should judge each to be immoral. If, on the other hand, you do not, then (given the restricted criterion employed here) you should not; although you may hold (for example) that they nevertheless trivialize these immoral acts and the experiences of those who have suffered, whether directly or indirectly, as victims of immorality. In which case, you should judge the gameplay to be in poor taste and, in accordance with suberogatory actions, hold that one ought not to engage with the gameplay, even if one is not morally obliged not to do so.

## 4 Concluding Remarks

In concluding this paper, it is important to stress that I am not suggesting that whether video game content is judged to be immoral or in poor taste is *simply* a matter of individual beliefs. In other words, I am *not* saying that what it all boils down to is this: “If you think it’s immoral or in poor taste then it is; and who’s to say who’s right or wrong”. Instead, what I am saying is that switching the focus of our moral scrutiny to the worldview allegedly espoused by a particular video game, especially in the absence of a comprehensive account of the type of analysis required to identify what these values (etc.) are (which neither Ostritsch nor Goerger provide), means that any judgement is dependent on an *interpretation* of the game’s content, and interpretations differ. In the case of poor taste, I have argued that the judgement “*x* is in poor taste” is the means by which S expresses their negative attitude towards *x* in virtue of the belief that *x* realized some property O of which S disapproves (S has interpreted *x* is a way that leads them to believe that *x* realizes O). Elsewhere (Young 2016), I have argued that a similar process is involved in the claim that *x* is immoral. The difference between that which is said to be immoral and that which is in poor taste, then, is that the latter is parasitic on the former because that latter amounts to a negative attitude towards *x* based on one’s belief about how *x* is *treating* something that one holds to be immoral (i.e., mocking murder or rape victims or trivializing the trafficking of illicit drugs, and so on).

What is missing from the story so far is how we arrive at a consensus robust enough to proffer an objectified standard; that is, a social norm proscribing the normative view that *x* is immoral, or not immoral but is in poor taste, or neither immoral nor in poor taste. An attempt has been made to explain this (see Young 2016) but it is not for this paper to discuss that matter. Instead, it has been my aim to identify a potential problem for a moral theory that treats as its object of moral inquiry the worldview (allegedly) espoused within a video game. How does one agree on what the correct interpretation is, especially when one adds to the categories available the arguably suberogatory act of expressing poor taste?

## Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of interest** On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states there is no conflict of interest.

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