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Objections to Ostritsch's argument in "The amoralist challenge to gaming and the gamer's moral obligation"

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Abstract This paper raises three objections to the argument presented by Ostritsch in *The amoralist challenge to gaming and the gamer's moral obligation*, in which the amoralist's mantra "it's just a game" is viewed as an illegitimate rebuttal of *all* moral objections to (typically violent) video games. The first objection focuses on Ostritsch's 'strong sense' of player enjoyment, which I argue is too crude, given the moral work it is meant to be doing. Next, I question the legitimacy of Ostritsch's claim that certain video games are immoral. I examine what is involved in making this claim and what would be required for a normative position to be established: none of which is addressed by Ostritsch. Finally, I challenge the legitimacy of his claim that players are *obliged* not to play certain video games in certain ways (i.e., games endorsing immorality as 'fun games'). I distinguish between immoral and suberogatory actions, arguing that the latter is in fact more applicable to cases Ostritsch has in mind, and that one is not obliged not to engage in these actions.

Keywords Player motivation · Gamer enjoyment · Ecumenical expressivism · Objectified social norm · Suberogatory action

Introduction

In *The amoralist challenge to gaming and the gamer's moral obligation*, Sebastian Ostritsch accepts the amoralist assertion that there is nothing intrinsically immoral about *playing* 'violent' video games, but nevertheless argues against the idea that the laconic mantra "it's just a game" is a legitimate rebuttal of *all* moral objections to (typically violent) video game content (Ostritsch 2017). Instead, Ostritsch argues that video games—or rather their respective gameplays considered holistically—should be the object of moral scrutiny and, where appropriate, liable to moral condemnation. In particular, he defends the following position: where a video game *taken as a whole* endorses an immoral worldview then the video game is immoral. He also argues that to enjoy such a game (based on a specific sense of enjoyment) is itself an immoral thing to do.

In this paper, I raise three objections to the position just described. Not because I seek to champion the amoralist cause, or because I disagree with the position Ostritsch adopts—at least, not after qualification—but, rather, because I find problematic the *manner* in which he defends his position. The first objection concerns a somewhat crude category Ostritsch employs when differentiating between ways of enjoying a video game: namely: 'enjoyment in a strong sense'. In opposition to this, I present a finer-grained means of differentiating between player enjoyment based on two distinct motivations, each compatible with Ostritsch's strong sense of 'to enjoy'. These are used to expose not only the lack of refinement evident in Ostritsch's strong sense but, also, owing to this lack of refinement, a potential contradictory dependency relation between (allegedy) immoral gameplays and the immorality of player enjoyment. Next, I question Ostritsch's means of justifying his claim that certain video games are immoral. I examine what is involved in making such a claim and, given this, what would be required for a normative position to be established: something that has *yet to be established*, I contend. Thus, while I accept, in principle, that it is immoral to *enjoy* (in a particular sense

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to be discussed) an immoral video game, I am nevertheless sceptical about the examples this moral judgement is predicated on (i.e., the games Ostritsch identifies as immoral). Finally, I challenge the legitimacy of Ostritsch's claim that players are morally *obliged* not to play certain games in certain ways (i.e., games endorsing immorality as 'fun games'). In order to do this, I distinguish between immoral and suberogatory actions, claiming that the latter is more applicable to the examples Ostritsch has in mind (owing to my aforementioned scepticism over his claim to have identified immoral games). Therefore, even if it is considered better (qua a socially preferred state of affairs) not to enjoy engaging in the enactments afforded by *these* games, one is not morally *obliged* not to do so, despite Ostritsch's avowal to the contrary.

In the next section I present a brief overview of Ostritsch's position before discussing the objections noted above in more detail ("Ostritsch's strong sense of 'enjoyment' needs refining", "How does one determine whether a gameplay *is* endorsing immorality?" and "What does Ostritsch mean by moral obligation?" sections). In the final section ("Conclusion" section), I conclude with a few remarks on the implications of my objections to Ostritsch's position, as well as video game morality more generally.

Ostritsch's position in brief

Ostritsch targets (although not exclusively) two single-player video games when mounting his attack on the amoralists' position: *RapeLay* and, later, *Hatred*.[1] With reference to the former, he states that "it is quite easy to name examples of real computer games that even gamers will find *morally appalling* (2017, p. 117; emphasis added), before adding: "If the amoralist is right, then our moralist intuition about playing games such as *RapeLay* is the product of a category mistake" (ibid., pp. 117–118). He makes further reference to our moral intuition when he states: "What makes the amoralist position so disturbing is that it challenges our intuition that, e.g., virtual rape is in itself… morally repugnant" (ibid., p. 119). And again when alluding to his own position: "[I] t is nevertheless possible to sustain the intuition that there is something morally wrong about games like *RapeLay*. I claim that we can save our moralist intuition if we locate the moral wrongness not in the activity of gaming but rather in the games themselves" (ibid., p. 118).

[1] In *RapeLay*, the protagonist stalks, sexually assaults and rapes women. In *Hatred*, one's goal as a player is to engage in the mass shooting and killing of unarmed civilians, including brutal executions.

Because Ostritsch's aim is to emphasize the immorality of certain video game content (in accordance with our intuition), rather than gaming per se, he rejects (wholly or in part) two established means of criticizing the amoralist challenge (although not solely for this reason): the consequentialist and expressivist approaches. Consequentialism is essentially the view that there are *real* (a posteriori discoverable) consequences to playing video games, whether positive or negative. In the context of 'violent' video games, a consequentialist-based argument against such content would hold that these consequences can be negative, despite amoralist claims to the contrary. The expressivist, on the other hand, holds, "that playing certain games *reveals* something about our character, namely that it is morally flawed" (Ostritsch 2017, p. 120; emphasis in original). But, also, that when cultivated through the playing of certain games, this flaw could have real-life (negative) consequences. Ostritsch's criticism of the latter position is more nuanced, it is fair to say, and perhaps amounts to an amendment rather than an outright rejection of expressivist views. Nevertheless, for Ostritsch, what is unpalatable and worthy of criticism is where these two approaches locate their moral concern:

> The consequentialist arguments employed by the utilitarian and the virtue ethicist [i.e., expressivist] relocate the moral wrongness of virtual actions outside of the virtual realm, thereby effectively supporting the amoralist claim that there is nothing inherently wrong about virtually raping a non-player character. But this is exactly where our moralist intuitions seem to lie. It is hard to see how our moral indignation towards the fact that someone is carrying out virtual rape should be the result of our reasoning that this will *lead* to something morally bad *in reality* rather than it being something bad *in itself* as a *virtual* action. (ibid., pp. 119 – 20; emphasis in original).

For Ostritsch, then, irrespective of whether it can be shown that there are real negative consequences to playing video games like *RapeLay*, and irrespective of whether playing such games reveals something about our moral character—that it is flawed (along with the potential negative consequences of this)—both of these attacks on the amoralist stance fail to acknowledge adequately the moral significance of the virtual content alone, and therefore the message the game *as a whole* is conveying and thus purportedly *prompting us* to endorse (to borrow Ostritsch's term). As a reaction to this, Ostritsch presents his *endorsement* view:

> I will defend the position that a game can rightly be called immoral if it *prompts us* to transfer the abhorrent worldview of a fictional setting to the real world, thus rendering the amoralist slogan "It's only a game!" false. (p. 118; emphasis added).

In the sections to follow I present more of Ostritsch's argument against amoralism, as I undertake to criticize it. I begin with an objection to a particular aspect of his double sense of 'to enjoy', which he introduces as a way of amending the amoralist's challenge.

Ostritsch's strong sense of 'enjoyment' needs refining

We know that, for expressivists, *enjoying* representations of immoral acts (such as rape) is a symptom of a morally flawed character and, moreover, will continue to harm one's moral character through the repetition of simulated vice (McCormick 2001). Because of this, enjoying representations of immoral acts is immoral. Ostritsch finds this last claim problematic; it is problematic because he holds that such a generalized judgement about the immorality of one's enjoyment fails to take account of the different ways in which we might enjoy playing a video game: for this may differ between gamers in relation to a particular game, or within a particular gamer at different times and in relation to different games. As Ostritsch explains:

> … "to enjoy" can be understood in a weak (or rather minimal), and a strong sense. The minimal sense of "to enjoy" just means to be captured or to be fascinated by something, while the strong sense of the word means to experience something as cheerful or fun (2017, p. 120)

With reference to video games like *RapeLay* and *Hatred*, even if (for the sake of argument) voluntarily playing such games means enjoying them on some level, Ostritsch nevertheless notes that it does not follow (*necessarily*) from this that one's enjoyment is of the strong kind; rather, it may be more appropriate to describe one's enjoyment in the weaker (or minimal), and hence less morally problematic, sense. If one's enjoyment is confined to this weaker form then the amoralist is correct to challenge the connection between enjoyment and immorality. In other words, when using the verb "to enjoy" in Ostritsch's weaker sense, it does not necessarily follow that enjoying simulating immoral acts is itself immoral.[2] I concur. Yet, importantly, Ostritsch adds that where one *does enjoy* playing a game in the stronger sense, *sometimes* (alluding to the aforementioned games) this is morally problematic. If it is morally problematic to enjoy playing these game in this way then it cannot be solely down to the virtual content itself, because one could enjoy (in a weaker sense) interacting with this same content without being morally admonished for doing so. Rather, a problem arises for the amoralist, if it can be shown that it is "wrong to play a certain game with a certain attitude or mindset" (Ostritsch 2017, p. 122). An attitude or mindset that is compatible with the stronger sense of enjoyment, it would seem. This being the case:

1. To enjoy (in a weaker sense, and with a concomitant mindset) playing video games like *RapeLay* or *Hatred* is not morally problematic and therefore not a challenge to amoralism.
2. To enjoy (in a stronger sense, and with a concomitant mindset) playing video games that are *not* like *RapeLay* or *Hatred* (e.g., the *Football Manager* series or *Super Mario*, and so on) is not morally problematic and therefore not a challenge to amoralism.

But

3. To enjoy (in a stronger sense, and with a concomitant mindset) playing video games like *RapeLay* or *Hatred* is morally problematic and therefore is a challenge to amoralism.

What Ostritsch is suggesting is that the manner of the moral judgement about the way a player interacts with the gaming content (i.e., enjoying doing so in a strong sense) is *dependent* on the moral status of the gameplay when viewed holistically (as can be seen when one contrasts point 2 with point 3 above). This, Ostritsch proposes, *is* a problem for amoralism because it proffers an example of an act of video game *play* that is a legitimate object of moral inquiry and, given the cases we are discussing, moral condemnation.

I wish to challenge the connection Ostritsch makes between player enjoyment (in a strong sense; hereafter, enjoyment$_s$) and gaming content. I wish to do this not because I consider it to be wrong in principle but, rather, because it is too crude and is therefore in need of refinement. By drawing a distinction between two different forms of player motivation, which are nonetheless compatible with Ostritsch's notion of enjoyment$_s$, I will demonstrate how one of these refined forms of enjoyment$_s$ severs the dependency of player morality on the morality of gaming content, thereby undermining the very thing Ostritsch tries to establish. It is my further contention that if we fail to distinguish explicitly between these different forms of enjoyment$_s$, given that they are compatible with Ostritsch's original notion of enjoyment$_s$, the following contradiction is inevitable:

[2] In Ostritsch's own words: "If we apply the minimal sense of the word, it is far from clear why it should be a moral flaw to enjoy playing games that contain virtual representations of immoral actions" (2017, p. 120).

(i) The moral condemnation of those who enjoy$_s$ *x* is dependent on whether *x* prompt us to endorse immorality

(ii) The moral condemnation of those who enjoy$_s$ *x* is not dependent on whether *x* prompt us to endorse immorality

Of course, we can easily avoid the contradiction if we make (i) and (ii) conditional on certain cases, so that it is true that in *certain cases* the dependency relation exists and in *certain cases* it does not. But in order to distinguish between cases, we need to refine Ostritsch's notion of enjoyment$_s$.

The case for dependency

To support my claim that Ostritsch's notion of enjoyment$_s$ is too crude, I will contrast it with Young's (2013) discussion on player motivation. According to Young, one motivation for enacting real-world violence or otherwise taboo activities involves enjoyment. One is motivated by the belief that a particular enactment will elicit thrills, excitement: in short, fun. This motivation Young calls M$_{(enjoyment)}$, which takes the following form:

M$_{(enjoyment)}$: S engages in the virtual act because S anticipates that it will be fun/thrilling. S anticipates that it will be fun/thrilling because the virtual act represents something that is taboo. In short, S desires to engage in the virtual enactment because the symbolic violation of the real-world taboo (i.e., what the virtual enactment represents), in virtue of being the enactment of a *taboo*, is something S anticipates deriving enjoyment from.

It is my contention that M$_{(enjoyment)}$ is compatible with what Ostritsch takes a strong sense of enjoyment to involve. What is absent from Ostritsch's discussion, however—although it may be implied—is the following consideration: that the appeal of violent video games and why people are drawn to them may well involve the belief/knowledge that they are, in a somewhat imprecise sense, 'immoral'. By that, I mean that it is understood that certain aspects of their gameplay *represent* immorality, and that is part of their appeal (Nys 2010). To reiterate, Ostritsch does not make this point explicitly, although he does distinguish between what a gameplay is endorsing and what it represents; adding that the two should not be confused. But even in the case of representing violence (or other taboos), rather than endorsing it, the amoralist's claim that *it's just a game* risks "implausibly sever[ing] all ties between the fictional and the non-fictional" (Ostritsch 2017, p. 122). Yet these ties are precisely what M$_{(enjoyment)}$ recognizes and even embraces: for it is not inconceivable that enacting virtual violence holds a certain allure for some people because they enjoy$_s$ engaging in simulated immorality and perhaps even identifying with the 'bad guy' (Schulzke 2011; see also; Konijn and Hoorn 2005). In fact, for Juul (2005), video games "are playgrounds where players can experiment with doing things they… would not normally do"; whereas, for Jansz (2005), they act as "private laboratories" (p. 231) within which gamers can engage with different emotions and identities, and invest in their own form of psychological exploration (see also Konijn et al. 2011). Such exploration might occur within a gamespace where social and moral conventions are quite probably violated and this is likely to add to their enjoyment$_s$ (Whitaker et al. 2013); conversely, for others, it may elicit disgust, irritation or guilt. For others still, it might result in them being both disgusted and thrilled by the virtual violence they enact (Rubenking and Lang 2014), so much so that they willingly become what Jansz (2005) calls the *architects of their own disgust*; all of which adds to their enjoyment$_s$ and motivation to continue.

In the case of enacting real-world taboos (but not exclusively so), the activity has symbolic transcendence insofar as it represents in one space that which is taboo in another. The action is therefore psychologically meaningful not only in terms of understanding what it represents, but also as a motivation to engage in the activity in the first place: *because it is fun in virtue of what it represents*, or at least that is what the player anticipates. In accordance with M$_{(enjoyment)}$, then, for some, simulating virtual violence is appealing precisely because it involves enacting taboos and therefore violating a real-world moral code.

According to Young, the gamer who is motivated by enjoyment$_s$ (qua M$_{(enjoyment}$) relishes the idea of enacting a taboo because it represents that which is *taboo*. That is what is (anticipated to be) thrilling and fun, and this can be achieved without wishing to endorse the real-life equivalent of the virtual act. Ostritsch would perhaps be willing to concede this point, if one were to limit one's enjoyment$_s$ to a game that sought only to represent violence or otherwise taboo activities, rather than (allegedly) endorsing them. Given this, it appears that, for Ostritsch, a player who is motivated to play a game like *Hatred* or *RapeLay*, in a manner captured by M$_{(enjoyment)}$, (as a refined form of enjoyment$_s$) would be acting immorally not because of the individual enactments themselves taken in isolation, or what is motivating their engagement with these enactments (i.e., their enjoyment$_s$ per se, qua M$_{(enjoyment)}$), but because of the fact that they would be deriving enjoyment$_s$ from a game that they knew was endorsing immorality, thereby further endorsing the immorality of the content through their inappropriate reaction to the gameplay (i.e., enjoying it in the manner discussed).

In such a situation, whether one should be morally condemned for enjoying$_s$ (qua M$_{(enjoyment)}$) the game is dependent on what the gameplay is allegedly endorsing (not simply representing); it is conditional on this. What this means is that if a gameplay endorses immorality, one should not

enjoy$_s$ playing the game, whereas if a gameplay (taken as a whole) is not endorsing immorality, but merely *represents* it through individual enactments, then the same level of enjoyment should not be considered morally reprehensible.

If we accept the truth of the proposition "endorsing immorality is immoral"—a fairly uncontroversial position to adopt—then it would seem that, for Ostritsch, enjoying$_s$ that which endorses immorality is itself a form of endorsement and hence immoral. More formally:

1. Endorsing the immoral is immoral.
2. Where *x* prompts us to endorse immorality,
3. and where S enjoys$_s$ *x*,
4. then S enjoys$_s$ that which endorses immorality.
5. Enjoying$_s$ that which endorses immorality is itself an endorsement of immorality.
6. Therefore, S's enjoyment$_s$ of *x* is immoral.

Replacing 'enjoys$_s$' (and its derivatives) with $M_{(enjoyment)}$ in 1–6 does not undermine Ostritsch's position with regard to the dependency relation he sets out to achieve between player enjoyment$_s$ and video game content, nor does it derail its use as a means of amending the amoralist's challenge. Therefore, in order to challenge this dependency relation, and hence Ostritsch's use of the verb "to enjoy" (in a strong sense), I need to identify an example of where this dependency relation breaks down. With this in mind, consider the following:

7. Where *x* does not prompt us to endorse immorality,
8. and S enjoys$_s$ *x*,
9. then S is enjoying$_s$ something that is not prompting us to endorse immorality.
10. Enjoying$_s$ something that is not prompting us to endorse immorality is not immoral
11. Therefore S's enjoyment$_s$ of *x* is not immoral.

The conclusion in 11 does not necessarily follow from premises 7–10. One could also question the truth of premise 10. This is because the reasoning employed in this example is grounded on a *sufficient* condition for immorality not a necessary one (i.e., that enjoying *x* is immoral if *x* prompts us to endorse immorality). As such, it may be that there is some other reason for morally condemning S's *enjoyment$_s$* of *x* that is independent of whether *x* endorses immorality (a point that also applies to premise 10).

The case against dependency

For an example of what this other reason might be, I again turn to Young (2013), who presents a further motivation for enacting real-world prohibited actions: namely, $M_{(substitution)}$.

$M_{(substitution)}$: S desires to engage in a particular real-world activity which happens to be taboo. This activity is represented by the virtual act. S therefore desires to engage in the virtual act (say, murder or rape or paedophilia) not because it is taboo (as is the case in $M_{(enjoyment)}$) but because it represents the real-world activity S desires to engage in (which happens to be taboo). Enacting the real-world taboo affords S the opportunity to satisfy this desire, vicariously.

According to $M_{(substitution)}$, a player who is motivated to engage in virtual rape (for example) is not motivated to do so because the enactment represents something that is taboo (in others words, they are not thrilled/excited by the fact that what they are enacting is *taboo* in the real-world). Instead, the player is motivated to enact, in a virtual context, that which they desire to engage in for real, which *just so happens to be taboo*. What is motivating this player (and, importantly, bringing them enjoyment$_s$) is not the fact that the enactment is taboo, but that it acts as a substitute for what they desire for real.

The act of *virtual* rape is not in and of itself morally problematic, as Ostritsch attests. In the case of $M_{(substitution)}$, what is morally problematic (I take as a given) is the desire to rape for real and therefore the *player's endorsement* of the act they really desire (i.e., actual rape) through the virtual enactment afforded by the gameplay. Importantly, then, player endorsement is independent of any endorsement of rape prompted by the game content, meaning the former can occur in the absence of latter.

This is a problem for Ostritsch because it is my contention that $M_{(substitution)}$ is also compatible with his notion of enjoyment$_s$. Yet, for Ostritsch, the morality of a player's enjoyment$_s$ is dependent on the extent to which a *gameplay* (taken as a whole) endorses an immoral act. By introducing Young's refinement (qua the two different motivations), it becomes evident that a player's motivation and therefore the reason for enjoying the virtual enactment, at least in the case of $M_{(substitution)}$, should in fact be regarded as immoral irrespective of any endorsement of immorality by the video game and not because of it. In other words, the immorality of one's act of enjoyment$_s$ in the case of $M_{(substitution)}$ should *not* be dependent on any endorsement of immorality by the gameplay, unlike enjoyment in the form of $M_{(enjoyment)}$.

$M_{(substitution)}$ exemplifies the expressivist's claim that someone who enjoys$_s$ virtually enacting rape or paedophilia, or such like, is morally flawed. One might anticipate Ostritsch being untroubled by this. He should, however, be concerned: for what $M_{(substitution)}$ adds is not only a refinement to the expressivist's account—by delineating the nature of the enjoyment more precisely—but a means of showing how judgements about the morality of this form of enjoyment (which, to reiterate, is compatible with Ostritsch's strong sense of enjoyment) are *not* dependent on gaming content: the very thing Ostritsch seeks to avoid.

To illustrate, consider the reasoning in 12–14 below, which is grounded on the premise that it is immoral to enjoy$_s$ that which endorses immorality:

12. Where *x* prompts us to endorse immorality,
13. and where S enjoys$_s$ (qua $M_{(substitution)}$) *x*,
14. then S's enjoyment$_s$ of *x* (qua $M_{(substitution)}$) is immoral

Given what we know about $M_{(substitution)}$, to assert that enjoying$_s$ *x* (qua $M_{(substitution)}$) is immoral *because* it involves enjoying$_s$ (qua $M_{(substitution)}$) that which is prompting us to endorse immorality (which 12–14 *implies*) not only deflects the direction of the moral condemnation away from its rightful place—in this case, player motivation—but also makes the moral condemnation of player motivation conditional on the morality of the video game content, which it does not (and should not) have to be.[3] In contrast, in the case of $M_{(enjoyment)}$, given that one can enjoy$_s$ enacting that which is taboo in the real world without the enactment being morally condemned (something Ostritsch would not disagree with), then any moral condemnation of player enjoyment$_s$ (qua $M_{(enjoyment)}$) is dependent on the immorality of the video game content, to the point where the immorality of the content becomes *necessary* and *sufficient* for the moral condemnation of those who enjoy$_s$ (qua $M_{(enjoyment)}$) enacting it. In contrast, in the case of $M_{(substitution)}$, the immorality of gaming content is *not* necessary for condemnation of *this* kind of player enjoyment. And even if one were to concede that it is sufficient for the ascription of some form of moral condemnation, such a position diminishes the nature of the moral condemnation that should be levelled at the player who enjoys$_s$ (qua $M_{(substitution)}$) playing games like *RapeLay* or *Hatred*: for the moral condemnation would be equivalent to that directed at the player who enjoys$_s$ the game (qua $M_{(enjoyment)}$), yet the motivation of these two players is quite different. This morally important difference would be lost if one were to retain Ostritsch's cruder notion of enjoyment$_s$.

Recall the following contradiction which I posited as inevitable when using Ostritsch's notion of enjoyment$_s$:

(i) The moral condemnation of those who enjoy$_s$ *x* is dependent on whether *x* prompt us to endorse immorality
(ii) The moral condemnation of those who enjoy$_s$ *x* is not dependent on whether *x* prompt us to endorse immorality

A way to avoid this contradiction is to differentiate between enjoyment$_s$ qua $M_{(enjoyment)}$ (which is compatible with (i)) and enjoyment$_s$ qua $M_{(substitution)}$ (which is compatible with (ii)). This is something Ostritsch fails to do: hence my objection and call for refinement.

Finally, if the immorality of $M_{(enjoyment)}$ is dependent on the extent to which the gameplay one is enjoying$_s$ (qua $M_{(enjoyment)}$) is endorsing immorality, as Ostritsch demands, thereby making such content necessary and sufficient for the moral condemnation of player enjoyment$_s$ (qua $M_{(enjoyment)}$), then a prerequisite of this dependency is the veracity of the claim that the gameplay (taken as a whole) *is* endorsing immorality. It is towards an examination of this point that I now turn.

How does one determine whether a gameplay *is* endorsing immorality?

To assert that one should not enjoy$_s$ (qua $M_{(enjoyment)}$) that which *is* endorsing the immoral hardly seems remarkable or controversial. Indeed, it is a view that allies itself to the moral intuition Ostritsch refers to throughout his paper. As such, I accept the following as a given: *If* Hatred is endorsing the immoral then one should not enjoy engaging with this video game in the manner we are currently discussing (hereafter, reference to 'enjoy' and its derivatives is reference to enjoy$_s$ qua $M_{(enjoyment)}$). But how do we establish the veracity of this conditional clause? Perhaps this is the more controversial issue. To begin, then, let us look at what Ostritsch has to say:

> [W]e can find out what kind of worldview (if any) is endorsed by a game simply by analyzing it. We do not need to talk to the developers. Once a game has been published, the developers have no special authority in determining its meaning. Imagine the developers of *Hatred* claiming that they did not intend the game to be a glorification of murder. Even if we were to believe this claim, this would not change anything about the fact that *Hatred* indeed does glorify murder, which is easily confirmed simply by looking at the actual gameplay. Because games speak for themselves in the way just outlined, I believe it is justifiable to speak about games as such being endorsements of certain worldviews. (Ostritsch 2017, p. 125).

Irrespective of whether it was intended or not, for Ostritsch, the game *Hatred* endorses actual murder—insofar as it glorifies it—and this, we are told, is a *fact*. Presumably, it is also a fact (the same type of 'fact') that the video game *RapeLay* glorifies the sexual assault and rape of women (although I appreciate that one 'fact' does not necessitate the other). The 'fact' that *x*—in this case, *Hatred*—endorses

[3] In the case of paedophilia (for example), one could engage with a video game involving children that does not endorse or even represent immorality and still enjoy (*qua* $M_{(substitution)}$) such interactions (see Ali 2015, for a related discussion).

immorality (i.e., glorifies murder) can be "easily confirmed [Ostritsch tell us] by looking at the actual gameplay" (ibid.). This would seem to suggest that its immorality is *prima facie* evident. It is likely, however, that Ostritsch means something more than this given that he also states that one can discover whether a video game is endorsing a particular immoral worldview "simply by analyzing it" (ibid.). He then gives a clue (although little more) as to what this might involve:

> We are led to believe that it [*Hatred*] endorses the morally abhorrent worldview that it is somehow desirable to murder because there is *no ludic or narrative element* that would thwart its main gameplay mechanic of merciless and brutal mass murder (ibid., p. 123; emphasis added).

In the absence of further details about the type of analysis required—and the conviction that such an analysis (whatever it happens to be) is appropriate—it is my contention that, as things stand, it is *not* in fact clear (or certainly not as clear as Ostritsch would have us believe) that *Hatred* is glorifying *actual* murder. So how can two opposing views be rationally held with equal conviction about the same content? To make sense of this, let us consider what is involved in (sincerely) declaring that "*That* is immoral".

In the case of *Hatred*, in order to claim that the virtual murders found within the gameplay, when taken as a whole, glorify actual murder, first and foremost, one must believe that *x* (the gameplay taken as a whole) realizes some property (P) that constitutes the glorification of actual murder. Moreover, to accord with Ostritsch's moral condemnation of such a gameplay, whatever this property is, it must be something of which one disapproves to such an extent that it is seen to justify one's negative moral attitude. More formally, where *x* constitutes the enactment of murder throughout the video game, *Hatred*:

a) S disapproves of P and believes that *x* (*Hatred*) realizes P.
b) Given (a), S has a negative attitude towards *x because* of the belief that *x* realizes P, a property of which S disapproves.
c) S's negative attitude, in the context in which it occurs, should be understood as an expression of moral disapproval towards *x* concomitant with the belief that *x* is immoral

The relationship captured within (a–c) is characteristic of a meta-ethical approach known as *ecumenical expressivism* (Ridge 2006). Ecumenical expressivism enables different people to have a shared negative (moral) attitude towards *x*—insofar as it is something they all disapprove of—but for different reasons. To illustrate, S_1 may have a negative attitude towards *x* because of the belief (perhaps established after 'ludic analysis') that *x* realizes *p* (glorifying murder), something S_1 happens to disapprove of. S_2 may likewise have a negative attitude towards *x*, only, this time, because S_2 believes (perhaps after performing the same analysis) that, rather than realizing *p, x* realizes *q* (trivializing murder) which is something S_2 happens to disapprove of. S_1 and S_2 share a negative attitude towards *x*, only for different reasons: namely, because they believe either that (in the case of S_1) *x* realizes *p* (glorifying murder) or that (in the case of S_2) *x* realizes *q* (trivializing murder). Importantly, though, despite the fact that S_2's reason for her negative attitude is different to S_1's, it is not necessarily the case that S_2 approves of video games that glorify murder (it is more than likely that she does not); rather, it is that S_2 does not believe that *x* (qua *Hatred*) realizes the property of glorifying murder (property *p*), but does believe that *x* trivializes murder (in virtue of realizing property *q*). It may also be the case that, like S_1 and S_2, S_3 has a negative attitude towards video games that either glorify or trivialize murder; but, unlike S_1 and S_2, does not have a negative attitude towards *x* (qua *Hatred*) because she does not hold the belief that *x* realizes either *p* or *q*. In fact S_3 does not believe that *x* realizes any property she disapproves of, and so fails to have a negative attitude towards *x* at all.

When one views Ostritsch's moral condemnation of the video game *Hatred* (or such like) through the lens of ecumenical expressivism then for moral agreement to occur—such that it is agreed that the gameplay of *Hatred is* (held to be) immoral–thereby enabling a challenge to the amoralist retort "it's just a game" to be sustained, an objectified moral norm must be established. Such a norm is, according to Young (2014, 2015), a product of *constructive ecumenical expressivism* (CEE). CEE postulates the following: where a shared *moral* attitude occurs with regard to some object or event (note that this shared moral attitude is different to a more general shared negative attitude; a point I will return to), even if different people have different reasons for this shared attitude, as a society we are able to create or *construct* a social norm that then acquires its own objectified moral standard (Prinz 2007). With the force of social consensus, and the moral norm this creates, we are able to adopt a normative position of our own making, whereby a particular (agreed) moral attitude is the one we *ought* to have, at least with regard to *this* object of moral inquiry. McAteer (2016) equates this *intersubjective* view with the normative standard espoused by Hume's *common point of view*. Under such circumstances, the moral disapproval of *Hatred*, if it were an objectified *moral* norm, would be warranted.[4]

[4] Moreover, under such circumstances, if there were consensus that *x* (*Hatred*) is immoral then it may be that all or most of those with this shared attitude also have the same reason for their attitude (e.g., the belief that *x* endorses actual murder, which of course they disapprove of). This would accord well with Ostritsch's position. Importantly,

Despite the strength of Ostritsch's conviction that *Hatred* endorses immorality by glorifying actual murder, and his further belief that this is something one can establish *just by looking* at the gameplay (which seems to involve some form of yet-to-be-established analysis reminiscent of that carried out within the respective fields of ludology and narratology), for a negative moral attitude towards *Hatred* to become the norm, at least according to CEE, a consensus has to be achieved (although not necessarily for the reason Ostritsch asserts regarding *Hatred's* endorsement of immorality). It is my contention that this required consensus has yet to emerge. Instead, what we currently have (among gamers and wider society) are different beliefs about the properties video games like *Hatred* (or *RapeLay*) realize. Some of these different beliefs may culminate in a shared negative attitude—some underlying sense of disapproval (perhaps grounded on our intuitions)—but this is not the same as establishing an overriding consensus that *x* is *immoral* (I will return to this point in the next section). Because of this, it is my further contention that, despite Ostritsch's view to the contrary and even indirect support from some others (e.g., Campbell 2014; Liebl 2014), there is currently no objectified norm (or *intersubjective* attitude) about a video game like *Hatred*: that it is endorsing (prompting us to endorse) actual murder and is therefore immoral for this reason or for any other reason. This is because we have yet to establish an objectified moral norm proscribing what ought to be morally unacceptable within a video game (see, for example, Tassi 2014, for evidence of fans of *Hatred*). Such a position not only undermines Ostritsch's view about the morality of *Hatred's* gameplay (and gameplays of a similar ilk) but also the immorality of enjoying such gameplays, given that the immorality of this form of enjoyment is dependent on the immorality of the video game content: something that is yet to be agreed on.

What would it take for consensus to be achieved and for *Hatred* to be considered immoral (or, conversely, not immoral). This is a difficult question to answer. Certainly, consensus does not require a unanimous verdict. CEE allows that there can and likely always will be dissenting voices. Moreover, it recognizes that not all the reasons that contribute to a shared attitude will be coherent or even align with available evidence. If my negative attitude towards *Hatred*—that it is immoral—stems from my disapproval of corrupting influences and my belief that *all* video games corrupt then this is easily challenged. The fact that the shared attitude is built on different reasons gives the attitude a degree of robustness, such that it can withstand successful challenges to *some* of the reasons underlying it: because where there are stronger reasons for the attitude (coherent and as yet unfalsified) then it will continue in its role as objectified norm. What is difficult to quantify is how many reasons or how many or who precisely within a society must hold the same attitude for it to be constructed as an objectified norm (irrespective of the related but distinct issue of legislation). Certainly the fewer and more idiosyncratic the beliefs on which the attitude is built, the less robust the attitude will be. CEE is useful insofar as it is able to account for a current situation regarding moral attitudes—why there is a shared attitude or why there is not. What it cannot do is identify (and therefore predict) the precise 'tipping point' at which consensus will be sufficient for a shared attitude (objectified norm) to be established.[5]

In concluding this section, while it seems fairly uncontroversial to accept the principle that enjoying that which is immoral is itself immoral and therefore accept that the morality of one's enjoyment of video game content (at least qua the kind of enjoyment we are discussing in this section) is dependent on the morality of the content itself (taken as a whole), and even that this constitutes a valid challenge to amoralism, what remains unclear is Ostritsch's proposal for how we are meant to establish that "*x* is immoral". This is an important failing given that the entire dependency relation Ostritsch seeks to promote is predicated on the veracity of this last claim. If we take CEE to be a means of accounting for what is required to establish the veracity of "*x* is immoral" (i.e., in virtue of a constructed moral norm based on a shared negative moral attitude towards *x* without necessarily having shared reasons for this attitude), then if it became the established view (for example) that *Hatred* merely *represents* murder, even gratuitous murder, rather than endorses it, as Ostritsch argues is the case with regard to *Grand Theft Auto V*'s satirical portrayal of violence despite views to the contrary (e.g., Goerger 2017; Saar 2015; Trotman 2014), then one's enjoyment of the gameplay of *Hatred* would not (should not) be considered immoral.

A difference in belief about properties realized within gameplays like *Hatred* has implications for the likelihood of societal consensus (as discussed). As part of this, a difference in the strength and nature of one's disapproval (given these beliefs) can impact on one's negative attitude, and therefore the likelihood of a consensus when it comes to judging whether *x* should be classified as *immoral* (as opposed to classified as something else) and therefore

Footnote 4 (continued)

though, this need not be the case. CEE is less demanding in terms of why *x* is immoral. Unlike Ostrisch's account, it does not require that *x* is prompting us to endorse immorality; this can be one of a number of reasons people have for their shared moral attitude.

[5] I thank the anonymous reviewer for pushing me to clarify this point.

whether *x* should be included within one's (society's) realm of moral *obligation*, as I shall now discuss.

What does Ostritsch mean by moral obligation?

Ostritsch occasionally refers to a gamer's moral *obligation*, although he does not give an account of what he means by 'obligation'. Certainly, there is a sense in which he seeks to identify things that the gamer *ought* not to do. To illustrate, Ostritsch tells us that video games like *Hatred* and *RapeLay* ought not to be played as 'fun games' and ought instead to be treated with moral contempt. But what is the strength/nature of this 'ought'?

There are actions (in the real-world) one is obligated not to do: (inter alia) murder, physical and sexual assault, stealing, lying. If one were to fail to meet this obligation then one would have done something morally prohibited, or what is sometimes referred to as *forbidden* (Chisholm 1963). Where *x* is forbidden and S does *x* then S has done something one is morally obliged not to do. Yet there are also actions it has been suggested one ought not to do which are not forbidden, insofar as one is not obliged not to do them. Driver (1992) calls these actions *suberogatory*. To illustrate: suppose a young and healthy man (S) and a heavily pregnant woman get on a bus at the same time, S just ahead of the woman. There is only one free seat and S takes it, knowing that the heavily pregnant woman will have to stand. Through his action, S has not violated a moral obligation—he has not done something forbidden—but he has, it seems reasonable to say, done something wrong. In light of this example, is the strength of the moral ought referred to by Ostritsch indicative of an obligation not to do *x* where *x* is forbidden, or does it allude to refraining from a lesser, suberogatory, action?

A suberogatory action may be considered offensive. In fact, when Chisholm (1963) identified a category that is arguably the precursor to the suberogatory, he named it 'offence'; but it would be contentious to refer to actions identified in this way as immoral. Indeed, the purpose of identifying the category 'offence'—or, as we are now calling it, suberogatory—was precisely to distinguish actions classified as such from immoral acts (qua acts we are obliged not to perform). The young man's behaviour on the bus might be considered inconsiderate or rude, but hardly immoral.[6] Likewise, if one ought not to play games like *RapeLay* as 'fun games' then a stronger, more detailed, argument, especially given the objection raised in the last section, needs to be presented for why doing so is immoral rather than (at worst) suberogatory. Of course, Ostritsch might retort: "Either way, one ought not to do it, and that's the point". Even so, there is far less moral force behind a claim that one ought not to do *x* because *x* is, say, in poor taste and liable to cause offense, then to say that one ought not to do *x* because it is immoral and we are obliged not to do that which is immoral. Ostritsch, it seems, is trying to argue for the latter state of affairs but has not shown how the alleged moral obligation, in the case of enjoying playing video games as 'fun games', is anything other than an 'ought not to' command directed at a suberogatory action rather than an immoral (qua forbidden) action.

In accordance with CEE, if one believes that *x* realizes property *p* (glorifying actual murder) as Ostritsch does—such that the gameplay encourages people through their enjoyment to delight in the idea of actual murder—then one could proffer an argument for why the gameplay is immoral. This indeed seems to be Ostritsch's approach (without mentioning CEE, of course). But suppose (and still in accordance with CEE), I believe that *x* realizes *q* (it trivializes murder, rather than glorifies it). I disapprove of the act of trivializing murder and, therefore, I have a negative attitude towards *Hatred*. All the same, I ponder thus: Although I consider murder itself to be immoral and disapprove of trivializing murder, is it actually *immoral* to treat murder in this way? After all, I may surmise that trivializing murder is quite different to encouraging someone to delight in the idea of murder; and even if both have a transcendent quality that moves beyond the gameplay[7], in the case of delighting in the idea of actual murder, one would be conceiving of the immoral (i.e., murder) in positive way—as something it is good to do—which, in terms of its position on the 'disapproval scale', elevates it above and beyond that which is occurring when one trivializes murder. If trivializing murder is to be categorized at all, then I would say that the classification 'suberogatory' is a better fit than 'immoral'.

For Ostritsch to declare with any moral authority that one should be obliged not to enjoy playing a game like *Hatred*, he needs to establish that it does in fact prompt us to endorse the immoral. Thus far, this has not been achieved. If, on

[6] One may wish to object to the 'bus' example by claiming that it is hardly comparable to virtual rape, for example. In response, I would argue that it is hardly comparable to actual rape (it goes without saying), but whether it is comparable to virtual rape or the kind of enactments of murder found in *Hatred* is precisely the point under discussion. We therefore need to be careful not to elevate the moral status of such virtual acts and what they may or may not be endorsing above what is warranted (given that what they may or may not be endorsing has not been established, insofar as there is no consensus). The question as to whether this content fits the category of suberogatory is therefore a legitimate one.

[7] Booth (1988), for example, talks of fictional narratives containing *fixed norms* that are intended to be exported from the fictional realm (i.e., treat people with respect). These are in contrast to *nonce beliefs* which we are required to hold for the duration of the fiction (e.g., zombies walk the Earth in ever increasing numbers).

the other hand, and in accordance with CEE, a consensus emerges stating that, at its worst, *Hatred* trivializes actual murder rather than endorses it, then while this may warrant disapproval, such disapproval does not necessitate the further belief that *x* is immoral. Instead, one may disapprove of *x* and one's enjoyment of *x* in a manner commensurate with one's disapproval of any suberogatory act. This means that one may consider (in this case) the act of enjoying *x* (i.e., *Hatred*) to be something that it is better (qua some socially preferred state of affairs) not to do, but not something that one is morally obliged not to do.

In concluding this section, the legitimacy of the obligation Ostritsch places on the player not to enjoy *x* is dependent on the veracity of the claim that "*x* is *immoral*". In accordance with CEE, should consensus fail to reflect this view and instead decree that *Hatred* (and such like) does not endorse immorality and is not therefore immoral, but also be of the opinion that it is offensive, then, arguably, such content fits better the category 'suberogatory'. As a suberogatory activity, one is not *obliged* not to enjoy it and therefore not *obliged* not to play *Hatred* as a 'fun game'. That said, one may still disapprove of the activity. Given this, as is consistent with suberogatory actions, perhaps it would be more apt to announce the following: "It would be better if one refrained from enjoying a game like *Hatred*, as the game content (taken as a whole) and one's enjoyment of it are liable to cause offence". Of course, not all gamers will agree that video games like *Hatred* are in poor taste or are likely to cause *widespread* offence; some may not care either way. Whatever the gamers' take on this, in the absence of a convincing argument for the veracity of the claim "*x* is immoral", it is difficult to justify the assertion that one should be morally *obliged* to approach these games in one particular way rather than another.

Conclusion

In conclusion, what I hope to have shown is that one can share Ostritsch's view that *enjoying immoral video games is immoral*—and therefore share his ambition to proffer a rebuttal of the amoralist's challenge—without necessarily endorsing the manner in which Ostritsch defends this position. Ostritsch is correct to differentiate between senses of 'to enjoy'. His error was in not refining his differentiation more, as I hope to have shown in "Ostritsch's strong sense of 'enjoyment' needs refining" section. Further, the truth of the proposition 'enjoying immoral video games is immoral' is something of a moot point in the absence of immoral video games or a satisfactory means of establishing their immorality. Ostritsch is less than forthcoming about how one determines the immorality of video game content, and therefore fails to convince when claiming that video games like *RapeLay* and *Hatred* are immoral because they *prompt us to endorse the immoral*. In the absence of further detail from Ostritsch, in "How does one determine whether a gameplay *is* endorsing immorality?" section, I introduced ecumenical expressivism as a way of explaining how Ostritsch arrives at the conclusion that *Hatred* (for example) is immoral, followed by CEE as a way of describing what would be required for Ostritsch's view to become a moral norm: something I suggested has not yet been established. Finally, in "What does Ostritsch mean by moral obligation?" section, given the problems of identifying actual cases of the moral position on which the proposition 'enjoying immoral video games is immoral' is predicated—namely, actual commercially available immoral video games—I challenged the coherence of Ostritsch's claim that gamers should be obliged not to play games like *RapeLay* and *Hatred*.[8] Where the possibility exists that these gameplays may be construed as offensive (in poor taste) rather than immoral, enjoyment of these games, in a strong sense (qua $M_{(enjoyment)}$), may be, at worst, judged to be an example of a suberogatory act, not an immoral one. Importantly, the former is not something we are obliged not to do.

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[8] The video game *Ethnic Cleansing*, designed by white supremacists, is a strong candidate for a game that endorses just such an immoral worldview; see Left (2002). The extent to which one would view it as a commercial game is a different matter, though.

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