

# MORAL JUDGMENT IN VIDEO GAMES

## ★ Effects of Medium, Moral Intuitions and Media-Based Empathy ★

### Theory

#### Morality and media: The influence of medium

Medium presenting moral dilemmas affects both moral judgments and choices (e.g., Patil et al., 2014)

Model of Intuitive Morality and Exemplars (Tamborini, 2013): one's real-life morality influences decisions in video games (e.g., Krömar & Cingel, 2016; Tamborini et al., 2018)

Technological advances in graphics concerning social features (e.g., emotions) (Hartmann & Vorderer, 2010)

Not 'just a game': interactivity and immersion make gamers feel socially and self-present (Biocca, 1997; Weaver & Lewis, 2012)

#### Moral foundations theory (Haidt & Joseph, 2007)

Moral intuitions = fast, unconscious appraisals preceding conscious moral reasoning (Haidt, 2001)

Humans are born with at least 5 moral intuitions (harm/care, fairness/reciprocity, ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, purity/sanctity) which get modified through cultural and social environment

#### Aim of the present study

Find out ...

- ... whether difference in judgments is also evident between video games and texts
- ... whether this is true for all moral foundations
- ... whether media-based empathy could better predict moral decision-making in virtual environments

#### Research in moral psychology

Ethical concerns regarding recreation of real moral transgressions → research mainly relied on text-based moral dilemmas (e.g., Clifford et al., 2015)

BUT: strong simplification, lack of richness and contextual salience → reducing generalizability and external validity (Gilbert & Wilson, 2007; Patil et al., 2014)

#### Empathy and morality

Inconsistent results on the influence of empathy (e.g., Gleichgerricht & Young, 2013; Francis et al., 2016)

Media-based empathy = all cognitive and affective reactions to emotional media content (Happ & Pfetsch, 2016) → might better predict moral decision-making in virtual environments

### Results

#### Influence of moral intuition salience and media-based empathy

12 binary logistic regressions:

Salience of the respective moral foundation predicted

Moral judgment in 4 scenarios (harm/care personal,  $\text{Exp}(B) = 2.68$ ; harm/care impersonal,  $\text{Exp}(B) = 2.01$ ; fairness/reciprocity,  $\text{Exp}(B) = 1.91$ ; and purity/sanctity,  $\text{Exp}(B) = 2.49$ )

Moral action-choice in 1 scenario (harm/care personal,  $\text{Exp}(B) = 1.97$ )

Affective media-empathy predicted

Moral judgment in 1 scenario (harm/care personal;  $\text{Exp}(B) = 2.14$ )

Immersion in video games predicted

Moral action-choice in 1 scenario (harm/care impersonal,  $\text{Exp}(B) = 2.27$ )

#### Influence of medium (video vs. text)

12  $\chi^2$ -tests: significant only for moral action-choice in 2 scenarios

Harm/care personal scenario ( $\chi^2(1) = 3.97, p = .046$ ; 18.3% in the video condition vs. 9.7% in the text condition would show the same behavior)

Purity/sanctity scenario ( $\chi^2(1) = 7.90, p = .005$ ; 32.1% in the video condition vs. 49.7% in the text condition would show the same behavior)

Frequencies of Moral Judgment and Moral Action-Choice

	Moral judgment				Moral action-choice			
	Yes		No		Yes		No	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Harm/care personal	29	11.5	224	88.5	34	13.4	219	86.6
Video (n = 109)	15	13.8	94	86.2	20	18.3	89	81.7
Text (n = 144)	14	9.7	130	90.3	14	9.7	130	90.3
Harm/care impersonal	25	9.8	231	90.2	21	8.2	235	91.8
Video (n = 108)	13	12.0	95	88.0	10	9.3	98	90.7
Text (n = 148)	12	8.1	136	91.9	11	7.4	137	92.6
Fairness/reciprocity	27	10.8	222	89.2	40	16.1	209	83.9
Video (n = 129)	12	9.3	117	90.7	17	13.2	112	86.8
Text (n = 120)	15	12.5	105	87.5	23	19.2	97	80.8
Ingroup/loyalty	44	16.4	225	83.6	16	5.9	253	94.1
Video (n = 137)	21	15.3	116	84.7	7	5.1	130	94.9
Text (n = 132)	23	17.4	109	82.6	9	6.8	123	93.2
Authority/respect	139	51.5	131	48.5	72	26.7	198	73.3
Video (n = 133)	75	56.4	58	43.6	37	27.8	96	72.2
Text (n = 137)	64	46.7	73	53.3	35	25.5	102	74.5
Purity/sanctity	221	86.3	35	13.7	108	42.2	148	57.8
Video (n = 109)	94	86.2	15	13.8	35	32.1	74	67.9
Text (n = 147)	127	86.4	20	13.6	73	49.7	74	50.3

Note: Dominant response option is bolded. 'Yes' for moral judgment indicates approval of the respective moral transgression, 'yes' for moral action-choice indicates one would have shown the same behavior in the situation. Expected values were always > 5.

### Method

#### Participants

N = 276

Age:  $M = 27.36, SD = 10.37$

Gender: 158 female, 118 male

Gamer Identification: slightly to moderately ( $M = 2.34, SD = 1.18$ ; scale 1 = not at all to 5 = extremely)

Gaming h/week:  $M = 6.71, SD = 10.52$ , range 0-70

#### Measures and procedure

Single online session

Electronic informed consent

Questionnaire section:

demographics, gamer identification, gaming hours/week, moral values (MFQ30; Graham et al., 2011), media-based empathy (2 subscales: affective media empathy and immersion in video games; Happ & Pfetsch, 2016)

Introduction to video game and main characters + test video

Stimulus section: 6 moral transgression scenarios (medium and order of moral foundations randomized)

After each scenario:

Moral Judgment i.e., Is it morally acceptable to ... ?

Moral Action-Choice i.e., Would you show the same behavior?

Optional justification of responses in free text format

Stimuli related questions i.e., prior knowledge of the game, device used, use of full screen mode

#### Design

DV: Moral judgment of and moral action-choice in 6 moral transgression scenarios of the video game *Red Dead Redemption II*

IV: Medium (video vs. text), moral intuition salience, media-based empathy

### Discussion

Individuals take their morality into virtual spaces, even when they do not act out the moral transgression themselves.

Media-based empathy is related to morality when it comes to harmful situations.

Influence of medium depends on its ability to exceed individuals' mental imagination with its contextual salience.

Moral decisions were often based on several moral intuitions.

Future research should take into account these interactions.

#### Limitations

First study to investigate moral decisions in *Red Dead Redemption II* (no pretest of stimulus material, subjective transcriptions)

Transfer of results to other video games needs to be tested

Liberal oriented sample

Link to *Red Dead Redemption II* game trailer

