



**ACCM SUBMISSION TO  
CLASSIFICATION POLICY DIVISION  
DEPARTMENT OF HOME AFFAIRS, CANBERRA**

**COMMENT ON  
DISCUSSION PAPER FEBRUARY 2010**

**Should the Australian National Classification Scheme include an R18+  
classification category for computer games?**

The Australian Council on Children and the Media (ACCM) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the issues around the question “Should there be an R18+ classification for computer games?”

The ACCM submits this full and referenced paper for consideration, as the template for individual responses to these questions does not allow organisational responses.

This submission has been prepared for the Australian Council on Children and the Media by Professor Elizabeth Handsley (Vice President), Dr C Glenn Cupit (Board member), Dr Wayne Warburton (member), Dr Ronald Newbold (member) and Barbara Biggins OAM (Hon CEO) .

Prof. Elizabeth Handsley is a specialist in media law as it relates to children, Dr C Glenn Cupit is Senior Lecturer in Human Development at University of SA and author of “Kids and the Scary World of Video”, Dr Wayne Warburton is Lecturer in Child development at Macquarie University, with a research interest in media violence, Dr Ronald Newbold is a retired Senior Lecturer, University of Adelaide, and Barbara Biggins is CEO of YMA, and a former convenor of the Classification Review Board (1994-2001).

The ACCM welcomes the opportunity to expand on the issues raised, at a later date.

For further information, please contact Barbara Biggins at above address.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

**The ACCM** is a not-for-profit national community organisation whose mission is to support families, industry and decision makers in building and maintaining a media environment that fosters the health, safety and wellbeing of Australian children.

Its patrons are Baroness Susan Greenfield and Steve Biddulph.

ACCM has a national Board representing the states and territories of Australia, and a comprehensive membership of organisations and individuals who support its mission. Membership includes ECA (Early Childhood Australia), ACSSO (Australian Council of State Schools Organisations), AHISA (Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia), AEU (Australian Education Union), Enough is Enough, Australian Association for Infant Mental Health, Parenting Research Centre, Junior School Heads Association of Australia SAPPA (South Australian Primary Principals Association), Federation of NSW P&C (Parents & Citizens), and the Council of Mothers’ Unions in Australia.

**ACCM's core activities** include the collection and review of research and information about the impact of media on children's development, and advocacy for the needs and interests of children in relation to the media.

**The ACCM's core services** include the national freecall 24/7 Children and Media Helpline (1800 700 357); the ACCM website [www.childrenandmedia.org.au](http://www.childrenandmedia.org.au) containing media-related information (attracting over 1000 visits per day); the award-winning and popular *Know before you go* child-friendly movie review service (now with more than 500 movie reviews); the development of parent media awareness materials, making submissions and participating in media interviews related to media regulation.

## **2. THIS SUBMISSION REFLECTS THE FOLLOWING PRINCIPLES**

### **2.1** The International Convention on the Rights of the Child Article 17, viz

"States Parties recognise the important function performed by the mass media and shall ensure that the child has access to information and material from a diversity of national and international sources, especially those aimed at the promotion of his or her social, spiritual and moral well-being and physical and mental health. To this end, States Parties shall:

- (a) Encourage the mass media to disseminate information and material of social and cultural benefit to the child and in accordance with the spirit of article 29;
- (b) Encourage international co-operation in the production of, exchange and dissemination of such information and material from a diversity of cultural, national and international sources;
- (c) Encourage the production and dissemination of children's books;
- (d) Encourage the mass media to have particular regard to the linguistic needs of the child who belongs to a minority groups or who is indigenous;
- (e) Encourage the development of appropriate guidelines for the protection of the child from information and material injurious to his or her well-being, bearing in mind the provisions of Article 13 and 18."

### **2.2** The Code under the Classification (Publications, films and computer games) Act 2005:

"Classification decisions are required to give effect to the following principles which are set out in the Code:

- (a) adults should be able to read, hear and see what they want
- (b) minors should be protected from material likely to harm or disturb them
- (c) everyone should be protected from exposure to unsolicited material that they find offensive, and
- (d) the need to take account of community concerns about:
  - (i) depictions that condone or incite violence, particularly sexual violence, and
  - (ii) the portrayal of persons in a demeaning manner."

**2.3** The Policy Guidelines on Children's Television of the Australian Council on Children and the Media.

### **3. IN THE PREPARATION OF THIS SUBMISSION, ACCM HAS**

- relied on its experience and active involvement in reviews of the classification guidelines
- reviewed the research literature as it relates to the impact of media on children. This is an ongoing activity of ACCM.

### **4. SUMMARY OF ACCM SUBMISSION**

**Should the Australian National Classification Scheme include an R 18+ classification category for computer games?**

**The ACCM's strong view is "NO".**

The ACCM considers that this is the wrong question to be asking. The question should be whether R18+ games should be legal.

Introducing an R18+ category for games will undermine the principles underpinning Australia's classification system. These require not only "adult freedom to see hear and read", but equally, that "minors should be protected from material likely to harm or disturb them". Present sale and hire system prohibitions (as seen with R18+ DVDs and videos) are not effective in preventing access by minors. Adding R18+ games will make parents' task of minimising their children's exposure to such content much harder.

Further there is increasing evidence of harm from violent and interactive computer games which supports continuation of the Ministers' precautionary stance in not allowing R18+ level content in games. Allowing R18+ content into the hire and sale system, will give easier access to games with more extreme violence and with more impactful depictions of sexual and drug taking activity than are permitted now (up to MA15+ level).

#### **The ACCM submission is divided into 4 parts**

- **Response to issues raised in the discussion paper**
- **ACCM's detailed response**
- **Response to industry arguments**
- **References**

### **5. ACCM RESPONSE TO ISSUES RAISED IN THE GOVT. DISCUSSION PAPER**

The ACCM would be very concerned if the Govt's approach to the issues raised by the proposal to allow an R18+ category for games in its discussion paper is inadequate, came to rely on a popularity contest. There are serious issues related to harm to children and young people that are not canvassed in this survey and which need to be seriously explored. See Section 6.2.

Our responses to the questionnaire in the discussion paper follow:

## “ARGUMENTS

To help us understand your reasons for your answer, please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following arguments:

- **Adults should not be prevented from playing R 18+ level computer games simply because they are unsuitable for minors**  
1)strongly disagree 2)disagree 3)do not know 4)agree 5)strongly agree

**ACCM:** While we agree with the plain statement, our agreement is qualified by 2 issues: 1) while R18+ games are by definition “unsuitable for minors”, R 18+ games will be easily accessed by them. 2) the research shows that adults are not immune to the risks from playing violent games identified in the research, nor from being exposed to the risks posed by the normalisation of violence as a response to conflict and desensitisation to the use of violence. The prevention is not “simply because they are unsuitable for minors” but because of concern over the social impact of wider availability.

- **The R 18+ classification category sends a clear, unambiguous message to parents that the game material is unsuitable for minors**  
1)strongly disagree 2)disagree 3)do not know 4)agree 5)strongly agree

**ACCM:** “R-18+” is only clear and unambiguous to those who are literate in the classification codes and that excludes many parents. Those parents who are well informed may get the message, but the existence of the category alone does not ensure that parents get the message.

It could also increase the attraction of such material to children. Whatever the attraction is for adult gamers that is inspiring them to engage in so much lobbying around the issue, we can assume the same will apply to children.

In addition the message that an R18+ category might send is unnecessary if such games were Refused Classification.

- **Consistent classification categories for films and computer games are easier to understand**  
1)strongly disagree 2)disagree 3)do not know 4)agree 5)strongly agree

**ACCM:** While agreeing with this, the ACCM notes that it is not the issue. The current system has no inconsistencies, so why ask this question.?

The issue is whether R18+ games should be more widely available in the market. The categories are consistent up to MA15+ . There is good evidence that a) the population does not always understand the differences in impact of content that necessitates some being in a higher category, and b) the population does not clearly understand the meanings of M and MA15+ and the distinction between the two. The absence of an R18+ category for computer games does not complicate their understanding.

- **A new classification will supplement technological controls on minors’ access to age-inappropriate computer games**  
1)strongly disagree 2)disagree 3)do not know 4)agree 5) strongly agree

**ACCM:** This question seems to assume that the new classification will be introduced? ACCM believes that not having an R18+ classification is an even better control. While R18+ may supplement technological controls, the issues are around parents' understanding of the need to use the technological controls and willingness to use them, and further, whether parents can control what goes on in other homes when their children are there.

- **Comparable classification systems internationally have an adult rating for computer games - international parity is desirable**  
1) **strongly disagree** 2) disagree 3) do not know 4) agree 5) strongly agree

**ACCM:** Cultural differences dictate many disparities between systems of classification, as well as between health and safety codes, building codes etc. We see no benefit to Australian parents for there to be the appearance of parity ignoring the realities of different national usage.

- **Consumers access games which would be R 18+ illegally - it would be better if they were legally available with appropriate restrictions**  
1) **strongly disagree** 2) disagree 3) do not know 4) agree 5) strongly agree

**ACCM:** Minors are more likely to access games if they are legally available than if they are illegal. We understand, for eg that it is difficult to get illegal access to console games.

The "blackmarket" argument provides no incentive to promote access. The same specious argument could be used to justify raising the speed limit or removing restrictions on gun ownership.

The message communicated by lifting the restriction would be that these are now deemed acceptable – why else would they be allowed?

- **Computer games should be treated differently from films given the specific, negative effects of interactivity on players, particularly their participation in violent and aggressive content.**  
1) strongly disagree 2) disagree 3) do not know 4) agree **5) strongly agree**

**ACCM:** There is a growing body of reliable evidence that interactivity increases negative effects of repeated playing of violent games. (see section 6.2)

- **It would be difficult for parents to enforce age restrictions for computer games.**  
1) strongly disagree 2) disagree 3) do not know **4) agree** 5) strongly agree

**ACCM:** This question should read "It is difficult ...". This would not be overly difficult for well informed and motivated parents aware of the risks of harm from very violent computer games. However, many parents would need much more information than presently available, and knowledge of the risks of harm. Further, parents find it difficult, if not impossible, to police what their children are exposed to elsewhere within their community.

- **Minors would be more likely to be exposed to computer games that are unsuitable for them.**  
1) strongly disagree 2) disagree 3) do not know 4) agree **5) strongly agree**

**ACCM:** As per our surveys of children's access to R rated videos, parents are often unable to prevent children's access to R18+ portable material elsewhere than in their own home.

- **An R 18+ for computer games would exacerbate problems associated with access to high level material in Indigenous communities and by other non-English speaking people**  
1)strongly disagree 2)disagree 3)do not know 4)agree 5) strongly agree

**ACCM:** The problems attributed to access to R 18+ and X materials in the NT are well known. There is little reason to think that those problems would not occur in other locations with culturally and linguistically different (CALD) communities.

- **There is no demonstrated need to change existing restrictions.**  
1)strongly disagree 2)disagree 3)do not know 4)agree 5) strongly agree

**ACCM:** ACCM can see no valid reason to add in an R18+ classification, but advocates that the criteria for violence in all presently allowed categories be reviewed in light of current research evidence.

## 6. ACCM'S DETAILED RESPONSE

### 6.1 The principles of the Australian classification system are :

"Classification decisions are required to give effect to the following principles which are set out in the Code:

- (a) adults should be able to read, hear and see what they want
- (b) minors should be protected from material likely to harm or disturb them
- (c) everyone should be protected from exposure to unsolicited material that they find offensive, and
- (d) the need to take account of community concerns about:
  - i) depictions that condone or incite violence, particularly sexual violence, and
  - ii) the portrayal of persons in a demeaning manner

ACCM believes that these principles apply equally, and that b. is not subservient to a.

- #### 6.1.1
- Where R18+ materials are portable, such as DVDs, videos and games, there is a much greater risk that children will not be protected from exposure to them. This represents a marked contrast with cinema films where there are meaningful opportunities to protect children.

While some parents might be well informed enough about risks and vigilant about preventing exposure in their own homes, not all are. Not even the most conscientious parents can prevent exposure at other people's homes and in other venues. ACCM's research "Kids and the scary world of video" showed a significant degree of exposure to R18+ videos among 10 and 11 yr old children in SA. There is no reason to believe that the situation has improved since 1986.

**6.1.2** ACCM therefore concludes that the proposal to add additional R18+ material via another format undermines principle **b)**.

**6.1.3** Further, principle **d)** must also be considered in this debate. This requires community concerns about depictions that condone or incite violence, especially sexual violence, to be taken into account.

There is significant community concern (especially among organisations concerned with children's mental health and wellbeing) about the impact of media violence on the young: American Academy of Pediatrics 2009, American Psychological Society 2003, Australian Psychological Association 2000, Royal Australian College of Physicians 2004, Royal Melbourne Children's Hospital 2009.

There are many concerns about the impact of games already in the system at MA15+\_level. This concern would lead us to propose that the criteria for inclusion of games at the MA15+ level should be reviewed before any consideration is given to adding R18+ level games.

In addition to this concern among informed children's professionals, there is a growing body of reliable research evidence to support those concerns. Further such evidence includes research which supports the Ministers' position of caution to date, on the basis that interactivity increases impact. See Section 6.2

## **6.2 The evidence for harm**

Long time video game researcher Craig Anderson with 7 other cross-national researchers sum up their latest meta-analytic review of the video game research studies, with

*"The pattern of results for different outcomes and research designs (experimental, cross-sectional, longitudinal) ... strongly suggests that exposure to violent video games is a causal risk factor for increased aggressive behavior, aggressive cognition, and aggressive affect and for decreased empathy and prosocial behavior."*

*"It is not surprising that when the game involves rehearsing aggressive and violent thoughts and actions, such deep game involvement results in antisocial effects on the player..."*

(Anderson, et al., in press; see also Anderson et al., 2007; Barlett et al., 2009; Gentile & Gentile, 2009).

In general, the evidence from the reliable body of research on the impact of media violence on the young is compelling. (Ref: Anderson et al., 2003; Bushman & Huesmann, 2006; Gentile, 2003).

Media violence is a contributor to the incidence of violence in real life, and the size of the effect of that contribution to real life violence has been estimated at around 10% across a range of study methodologies and populations (Anderson & Bushman, 2002b; Anderson et al., 2003)

Short-term exposure to media violence increases the predisposition to act aggressively for both children and adults. Repeated exposure to media violence is likely to have further deleterious effects, including greater fear, a hostile bias whereby others are seen as threatening and dangerous, greater hostility, desensitisation to further depictions of violence, beliefs normalising aggression and detailed and generalised scripts for aggressive behaviour (Anderson & Bushman, 2002a; Anderson & Gentile,

2008; Bushman & Huesmann, 2006; Donnerstein, Slaby & Eron, 1994; Strasburger & Wilson, 2003).

Who is more at risk? Some studies suggest that children under 7, males, and those with high initial aggressiveness may be more at risk. However most of the evidence in more recent studies and better designed studies suggests that short term effects occur regardless of age, gender, and socio-economic status, and that this flows on to long term effects as well. This makes sense, as human brains tend to be similar in construction and processing, and so one would not expect big differences in gender, age and so on. Games with more depictions of blood and where violence is rewarded seem to have stronger effects.

There is growing evidence that interactivity produces stronger effects than passive exposure, but this research stream is just a decade old (compared to 40+ years for TV and movie effects) and more research is needed to verify this effect.

There are those who dispute the evidence of harm from media violence, and in particular, from violent computer games. (for eg Kutner and Olson 2008)

ACCM provides the following excerpt from Warburton (2010) as argument supporting the role of media violence in increasing the risks that repeated viewing/ playing will increase real life violence.

“In more recent times, two models of media effects have been being particularly influential.

“ ... a General Learning Model (GLM) [has been developed] that demonstrates ways in which aggressive media content is internalised, primarily through the development of aggressive schemas and scripts. This feeds into a more general model of aggression (the General Aggression Model: GAM) in which it is posited that in an instance of aggressive behaviour:

- (1) there is a situational trigger such as a provocation, coupled with a person's own characteristics which make them more or less predisposed to aggress,
- (2) various cognitions (memories, beliefs, expectations, action tendencies) and feelings (such as anger or frustration) are aroused, along with bodily forms of arousal, and
- (3) depending on a number of factors the person may act on their immediate impulse (to aggress) or think through their response (usually reducing the likelihood of an aggressive response). Those with a high exposure to violent media are more predisposed to aggress because they have more readily accessible scripts for aggressive behaviour, have more triggers for aggressive behaviour, and have more aggression-related cognitions that can be activated (e.g., memories, concepts, scripts, schemas, action plans).

Also influential is Script Theory, put forward by Rowell Huesmann and colleagues. In this theory, violent media

- (1) provides clear scripts for aggressive behaviour (i.e., the situations in which one should respond aggressively and the manner of that aggressive response), as well as
- (2) a range of aggressive problem solving strategies and

- (3) beliefs normalising the use of aggression to solve interpersonal problems or to obtain what one wants. When a heavy consumer of violent media encounters a similar problem to one already encountered in a previous media experience, a script for behaviour is chosen and enacted. Aggressive belief systems reduce resistance to the script by reducing the influence of non-aggressive social norms, and a lack of alternative, non-aggressive solutions also makes the enactment of the aggressive script more likely.

Underlying both the GLM/GAM and Script Theory is the notion of neural connectivity. When we encounter an experience, neurons are set aside to recognise it again. The colour red, what bread smells like, the feeling of shame, what a gun is. On the next experience of that particular thing, the same neurons fire again in recognition. Experiences that happen together become neurally connected together. So, if we see the colour red as blood a number of times, seeing the colour red in any circumstance will also activate the neurons for blood, increasing the likelihood that we will think of blood when we sense the colour red. If a particular group of experiences occur together regularly, they form a discrete knowledge structure called a schema.

For example, after enough trips to the supermarket, just seeing the supermarket sign will activate a supermarket schema and the rest happens automatically. We know where most things are, what is expected of us, and what we can expect to happen, without thinking about it. We also know roughly what will happen over time. This is the script. *Go through the gate. Pick up a basket. Fruit and vegetables in the first aisle. Milk at the back. Buy a chocolate near the front register. Line up and pay. Feel shock at the unexpectedly high cost. Walk back to the car.*

Schemas and scripts may be triggered by exposure to a number of the component elements in the knowledge structure, and are usually activated automatically and outside of conscious awareness. Activated schemas and scripts have a strong influence on behaviour, because they contain action tendencies along with the other components.

From what we know of neural connectivity, it is reasonable to assume that people with a high exposure to violent media have:

- A large number of concepts for aggressive behaviour stored in their neural network;
- A large number of triggers for those concepts;
- Strong neural connectivity between the concepts that are activated together a lot;
- A number of aggressive schemas and scripts made up of discrete structures of concepts that are regularly activated together;
- Various aggressive schemas that are easily activated in life. This is because those schemas are frequently activated during media experiences (e.g., a violent video game where similar scenes are played frequently), and are activated by a range of life experiences which may include triggers like those in the game (the trigger may be something as simple and as general as frustration).

A large body of research supports these assumptions. Indeed, evidence for all of the models and processes thus far described is considerable and comes from a wide range of research methods – experimentation, correlation, observation, case studies,

interviews and longitudinal studies (some of which have followed the course of aggressive behaviour in the same individuals for almost 50 years).

Although research into the effects of exposure to pro-social media has been undertaken for some decades, there has recently been a concerted focus on this issue in key media effects laboratories, including those of Craig Anderson in the US and Tobias Greitemeyer in the UK. These are converging to suggest that exposure to pro-social media has a significant and positive effect on pro-social behaviour. It seems reasonable to assume that neural networks which have been exposed to a lot of pro-social influences will include a lot of pro-social concepts, numerous triggers for pro-social behaviour, and a variety of scripts regarding prosocial behaviour.

Overall, psychological research shows that the content of media is crucial. Exposure to antisocial media affects the person's neural network so that it becomes laden with aggression-related concepts and feelings, aggressive strategies for problem solving, memories about aggressive behaviour, aggression-approving beliefs, scripts for aggressive responding, triggers for aggressive responses, and aggressive action tendencies. Such effects are hardly surprising, as they involve the same processes by which all parts of human experience are laid down in the brain. Similar principles underlie the pro-social effects of exposure to pro-social media.

What is important is that data from a range of research methodologies converges to the same conclusions - the ones we have noted. Each methodology has its strengths and weaknesses, but a convergence of evidence gives pretty compelling evidence that the findings have considerable validity and may be trusted. Especially given the numbers - thousands of papers.

Government policy decisions, as well as the decisions of media outlets, parents, and others responsible for the development of our children, should be more based on what we know about media effects, rather than on common misconceptions, loud minority views, or pressure from the industries that produce media."

### **6.3 Self-interest and protection of the vulnerable.**

In this section we respond to the argument often advanced by the gaming lobby that the number of adult gamers, or the average ages of gamers, justifies the relaxation of the ban on R18+ games.

This argument does not deny that playing R18+ games would be potentially harmful to children. Rather it takes the position that this potential for harm is less important than the interests of adults in playing highly violent games. Being based on relative numbers of adult and children gamers, it is a majoritarian argument.

Yet there are numerous instances in our society where we accept that some people - even a majority of people - should endure restrictions in order to protect the vulnerable. For example, if a child is violently allergic to peanuts, no other children in his or her class are allowed to have products containing peanuts anywhere in the classroom. This is highly inconvenient to those other children and their families. But no responsible person would demand that peanuts be allowed, and the allergic child left to suffer. This is so, no matter how large the group affected by the ban or how small the group being protected.

Arguably, the more adult gamers there are who would have an interest in playing R18+ games, the greater the risk that those games would fall into children's hands. To use

the peanut analogy again, one might not be so concerned about allowing peanuts if we knew that only one other child in the class was likely to bring them. The risk of contamination is far greater if you know a lot of children will bring them. So with computer games: if there really are as many adult gamers as the gaming lobby claims, and they include people who have a strong interest in accessing material with a higher level of violence, we have cause to be worried about the greater availability of ultra-violent games.

## 7. Industry Arguments

This section addresses the main arguments used by the industry and gamers in support of introducing an R18 + category for games, namely Interactive Australia 2009 (henceforth IA9), published by the Interactive Entertainment Association of Australia [ now IGEA]. Many of the views expressed in IA9 can also be found on gaming blogsites such as Kotaku Australia, [http://www.kotaku.com.au/.](http://www.kotaku.com.au/))

7.1. *"The average age of gamers is now 30"* (see IA 9 report 2009 pp. 5-7, 9, 15-20, 30-36, 41)

**ACCM response:** The gaming industry and gamers make much of the supposedly maturing and gender-balanced population who play video games. It is difficult to see the relevance of this point. One can say the same thing about many populations, such as car drivers and alcohol users, without this being an argument for, in effect, making drinking or car driving more easily available to minors.

7.2 *"There's no proof of harm":*

**ACCM response:** The link between the consumption of media violence and violent behaviour is twice as strong as the link between passive smoking and lung disease and we have taken many precautions as a result of the latter.

The negative effects of violent media content have been established for decades but the evidence that violent video games, with their immersive, highly arousing, reward-the-punisher qualities, are harmful, is particularly clear and damaging. (eg. Gentile, D. and J. 2008; Polman H. et al.2008 )

Sophisticated statistical analyses and longitudinal studies are able to discount the arguments that violent games provide catharsis and that correlation-is-not-causation. (See eg., Anderson C et al 2007.)

Trying to rebut such evidence by a campaign of disinformation ("there is no evidence for harmful effects"), by citing studies funded by the gaming industry, or by referring to methodologically weak studies, where users might, for example, be phoned up and asked if they experience any negative effects, and which, unsurprisingly, conclude that there are no harmful effects, is not a sound basis on which to develop law and policy. . Moreover, it is inconsistent to claim that video games have positive pedagogic effects (IA9, 51-53) and yet have no potentially dangerous effects on behaviour and attitudes. The belief that video games have no effects is not shared by defence force trainers across the world who have found first-shooter games very useful in training recruits to shoot people, conditioning them to kill. (Such trainers would be astonished at the findings of Kutner L and Olson C (2008) *Grand Theft Childhood: the Surprising Truth about Violent Video Games and What Parents Can Do*, , pp. 193-99, that there is no connection between such training and shooting behaviour) The biggest predictor of violent behaviour after membership of youth gangs is frequent use of violent video

games (Anderson 2007 p. 143). The evidence for desensitisation is particularly damaging for the industry's reliance on parents to be vigilant. Parents themselves are in danger of becoming less capable of foreseeing damage in minors, and will be become even less so with more R18+ game playing.

### 7.3 "A large percentage of Australian adults want an R18+ for games":

**ACCM response:** The gaming industry (IA9 (pp. 7, 42-43, 46)) make much of the 91% of a sample that answered yes to the question in a survey: "Do you think there should be an R18+ for games?" (in the same way as adults can easily access R18+ material in other media)? The disingenuity of this motherhood question is remarkable. It is perfectly obvious that nothing like that percentage would say yes if the grisly content of R18+ games (not to mention their harmful effects and inevitable use by children) were explained to the respondents.

Did this thought really not occur to the IEAA, especially as IA9 (pp. 7, 42, 46) admits that respondents *are* concerned about violence and protecting children? To record that 63% of respondents did not know that R18+ videogames were not legally available simply shows the degree of ignorance about the classification system and what it entails. It seems very optimistic for the industry to contend that adding an R18+ category to the classification system will dispel ignorance and confusion, and create a safer classification system. We are airily and without evidence assured by the industry and its supporters (e.g., R. Curry, CEO of IEAA in a communication of 7.3.08) that the availability of R18+ video games in other mature democracies is not a problem. The evidence for harmful effects (more desensitizing punitiveness, less willingness to forgive, more hostile thoughts and feelings, more aggressive behaviours, more glamorization of violence) compiled by researchers looking at a variety of cultures, and the need for game creators to forever increase the mayhem content of certain games to continue to appeal to palates forever at risk of becoming jaded, suggest such complacency is unjustified.

### 7.4 "Content that is presently being squeezed into MA15+ will go instead into R18+"

**ACCM response:** This widely disseminated view implies that the Classification Board is not competent at its job. It ignores the fact that some potentially R18+ games have had their content cut in order to meet the MA15+ guidelines. If, and this is not proven, some high impact material is currently being "squeezed" into the MA15+ classification, then surely this is an argument for stricter classification, not for legalising the R18+ category.

Those seeking greater access to R18+ games typically complain of inconsistent classification. Perceived inconsistencies are inevitable and such complaints are as useful as bemoaning that not everyone shares one's opinion of a film or book

A related argument is that material classified R (or similar) overseas is being classified MA15+ here in Australia. This is said to support the "squeezing into MA15+" argument. However it does not prove anything about the workings of the Australian classification system, because those other countries do not necessarily have the same criteria for R (or similar) as we do (or would, if there were such a classification). Therefore there is no ground to presume that an R (or similar) rating overseas would necessarily mean an R rating here.

The problem here is one of drafting. The ban on R-rated games was achieved by removing the classification and its criteria from the scheme completely, presumably in the expectation that classifiers would understand that anything stronger than MA15+ should be RC (Refused Classification). But the description of RC is not 'anything

stronger than MA15+'. Rather it incorporates the concept of material of *such* high impact that it *should not* be available. In retrospect this was an error, because it creates something of a vacuum in the scheme. It is no surprise that in reality, classifiers have to choose, when dealing with material that would have been rated R, between MA15+ and RC. No doubt some material is really of greater impact than MA15+ should allow, but it still doesn't meet the criteria for RC. The answer to this is to reframe the criteria for RC so as to incorporate the description for R (if such a classification existed). It is not to introduce a legal R classification.

#### 7.5 "An R18+ classification will provide greater protection for children"

The industry claims that "an R18+ classification will decrease the exposure of children to inappropriate content, because it sends a clear message to parents that certain material is not appropriate for children, and that the lack of an R18+ for games, particularly when one exists for films, only causes confusion and lessens the ability of parents to take responsibility."

**ACCM response:** Among parents the classification system and the fact that some material is legally restricted are neither well understood nor consistently acted upon. Present experience suggests that parents presently don't understand the meaning of the MA15+ classification and that it has legal effect. No evidence has been offered that an R18+ will be any better understood and acted upon.

Further, an R18+ classification will allow into the system far more extreme content than at present. Minors will, inevitably, get access to that content. Has the gaming industry found a way of ensuring this will not happen, a challenge that has so far defeated distributors of film, internet material, and magazines?.

Adult DVDs, for example, are freely available to children from a plethora of unauthorised retailers who don't know or don't care about age-related sale restrictions. The argument that young children will access R18+ video games via the internet is not a reason to relax access in Australia, simply a reminder of the challenge of harm minimisation that faces the industry and governments, not to mention parents. That non-Opal petrol can still be obtained by some sniffers in the outback is not an argument for relaxing controls there. It merely underlines the problem. Similarly with the availability of cigarettes and alcohol to minors. Why emphasise the responsibility of parents to control access to R18+ videos and then make their task harder?

#### 7.6 "Parents should be more responsible"

**ACCM response:** Parents find that videogame use by their children is harder to control than use of TV or mobile phones, that is, if they are among the minority who actually pay much attention to classifications. A recent report from New Zealand, where R18+ games are freely available, is summed up by the sentence: "There is widespread disregard for restrictions." (<http://www.parentline.org.nz/r18-means-r18>). Why would Australia be different?

The IA9 (pp. 7, 44-45) shows, but does not express concern, that 46% of the time adults (apart from the business's employees) are not present when children buy or hire videogames. The problem of piracy is acknowledged but glossed over (IA9, pp. 7, 47). Parents typically are more concerned about the amount of time children spend playing games rather than about their violent content. The task of parents is magnified by the greater enthusiasm of children for playing interactive videos than other forms of digital entertainment, something the IEAA acknowledges. It is fair to require parents and other adults to be responsible and employ devices such as console locks, and sensible

to make their current task more difficult?. If parents need more educating, it is necessary to identify who will fund the campaign of enlightenment. In the view of ACCM, it is not realistic to think a revised classification system will fix things?

*7.7 "Gamers know better than non-gamers that games are not harmful"*

**ACCM response:** The gaming industry reports that gamers see games as less violent and harmful than non-gamers do. (IA9 pp. 8, 38, 51-52.). The implication is that they know better. But do they? The enthusiasm with which some gamers describe extremely violent games ("good harmless fun") suggests researchers who maintain that such games have a desensitising effect are right.

The implication is that they know better. But do they? Alcohol, gambling and hoon driving are seen as more of a problem by non-drinkers, non-gamblers and careful drivers than problem drinkers and gamblers and drivers do, who frequently are trapped in denial. Tellingly, IA9 (p. 46) admits that non-gamer adults are *less* likely to ignore classifications when buying a game for someone who does not meet the classification age marked on the game package. How, then, is being better informed a plus?

*7.8 "An R18+ category will allow the games industry to expand and grow"*

**ACCM response:** The industry is already enjoying very healthy, 15% p.a. growth (retail sales in 2009 \$2bn) If, as it claims, it is really concerned for the welfare, happiness and rights of "democratically-deprived" Australians, it would concentrate on promoting prosocial, altruistic videos. These have been shown to effectively encourage prosocial attitudes and behaviour in users.

*7.9 "Australia is the only developed country without an adult classification for games"*

**ACCM response:** The classification schemes differ between developed countries for many reasons- cultural differences, different bases for legal systems, and existence of Bills of Rights. They also differ in the type of material allowed in Mature and Restricted categories. What one country considers is OK for R may not be allowed there by another. We are no lesser a country for sticking to our own opinions.

*In summary*, the industry case for greater availability of R18+ interactive videos, and the clamour of some gamers about their right/need/desire for them, is without merit. The industry is already enjoying very healthy, 15% p.a. growth (IA9 pp. 8, 51-52). If, as it claims, it is really concerned for the welfare, happiness and rights of "democratically-deprived" Australians, it would concentrate on promoting prosocial, altruistic videos. These have been shown to effectively encourage prosocial attitudes and helpful, co-operative behaviour in users (eg., Gentile D et al)

What is more, such users are then more likely to buy further prosocial videos (Cf. IA9 p.54). Why not exploit *that* market opportunity?

## **8. ACCM CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Expanding the present classification for computer games to include an R18+ category will:

- a) expose minors to an expanded range of extremely violent materials and content with more impactful depictions of sexual activity and drug taking than at present.
- b) this material is harmful to minors

- c) this exposure will occur in many venues, and cannot be prevented by parents acting responsibly
- d) this proposal should not be accepted as it will undermine the principles of the Classification Act

**RECOMMENDATION: that this proposal be rejected**

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