

Submission

on an

R18+ Classification Category For Computer Games

to the

Classification Review

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29 January 2010

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1. Introduction

An R18+ classification for computer games has been discussed several times by censorship ministers including at the Standing Committee of Attorneys-General (Censorship) meetings in November 2005 and March 2008.

On each of these occasions the proposal to introduce an R18+ classification for computer games has not been supported.

Indeed at the March 2008 meeting censorship ministers declined to support a proposal to develop a discussion paper for public consultation, effectively deciding not to pursue the matter any further.

The current consultation appears to be a unilateral initiative of the Commonwealth government. A discussion paper was released by the Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department in December 2009.¹ Public submissions are invited and are due by 28 February 2010.

2. Effects of violent computer/video games

There is now a substantial body of scientific research into the effects of violent computer games on players. This research demonstrates that violent computer games are significantly associated with:

- increased aggressive behaviour, thoughts, and affect;
- increased physiological arousal;
- decreased pro-social (helping) behaviour.²

Researchers Swing and Anderson say: "A clear picture has emerged of the effects of violent video games on aggressive affect, behavior, and cognition ... short term exposure to violent video games produces immediate increases in aggressive behavior, aggressive cognition, and aggressive affect; repeated exposure leads to the development of stable individual differences in aggressiveness."³

Recently longitudinal studies have also found a relative increase in aggression over time by those who consume high levels of violent video games.

Anderson and colleagues conducted longitudinal research in the United States and Japan which demonstrated that habitually playing violent video games leads to increased physical aggression some months later in children and adolescents and that this effect occurs in the two very different cultural contexts of the United States and Japan. The research contradicted the popular hypothesis that only aggressive children become more aggressive from playing violent video games.⁴

A longitudinal study of German adolescents by Moller and Krahe found that exposure to violent games influenced physical aggression 30 months later via an increase of aggressive norms and hostile attribution bias.⁵

Wallenius and Punamaki have reported the results of a longitudinal study of Finnish adolescents. It found that "digital game violence was linked to direct aggression both longitudinally and synchronously, and the link was moderated by parent-child communication in interaction with sex and age. Results suggest that the moderating role of parent-child communication changes with increasing age. Poor parent-child communication may be one of the factors in an adolescent's development that may strengthen the negative effects of digital game violence, but even good parent-child

communication does not necessarily protect the adolescent in the long run. Digital game violence seems to be one of the risk factors of increased aggressive behavior.”⁶

Some other particular findings from recent studies include the following:

- violent video games are especially likely to increase aggression when players identify with violent game characters;⁷
- increased play of a violent first person shooter video game can significantly increase aggression;⁸
- participants who previously played a violent video game had lower heart rate and galvanic skin response while viewing filmed real violence, demonstrating a physiological desensitisation to violence;⁹
- video game violence exposure was associated with stronger pro-violence attitudes in 4th and 5th graders;¹⁰
- violence desensitisation should be reflected in the amplitude of the P300 component of the event-related brain potential (ERP), which has been associated with activation of the aversive motivational system. Violent images elicited reduced P300 amplitudes among violent, as compared to non-violent video game players. Additionally, this reduced brain response predicted increased aggressive behaviour in a later task. Moreover, these effects held after controlling for individual differences in trait aggressiveness;¹¹
- adolescents who expose themselves to greater amounts of video game violence were more hostile, reported getting into arguments with teachers more frequently, were more likely to be involved in physical fights, and performed more poorly in school. Mediation pathways were found such that hostility mediated the relationship between violent video game exposure and outcomes.¹²

Anderson reports that “the long term effect of video game violence on later aggression and violence is larger than most known risk factors for adolescent violence, such as abusive parents, poverty, and antisocial parents”.¹³

These findings strongly indicate that a precautionary approach should be taken to any proposal to make violent computer games more widely available in Australia.

3. Interactivity

The rationale for excluding an R18+ classification for computer games while providing such a classification for films is that computer games involve a level of interactivity significantly greater than that involved in viewing a film.

Significantly, research commissioned by the Interactive Entertainment Industry Association confirmed that Australians – both gamers (79%) and non-gamers (87%) – shared the view that “interactivity made media experiences more violent”.¹⁴

There are three reasons why the effect of violence from computer/video games would be greater than that from viewing films:

- in computer games the player often identifies with the aggressor;
- the player actively rehearses the whole sequence of aggression; and

- the proportion of the game devoted to violence is higher than for most films.

Swing and Anderson explain how each of these factors would work:

“A common question about violent videogame effects is whether they are stronger than the effects that have been found for violent television and films. There are several reasons, based on social psychological theory, to believe this to be the case. First, theory suggests that identification with an aggressor makes an individual more likely to behave aggressively in the future. Videogames force a player to identify with the aggressor because the player is controlling them... This increased identification with the aggressor is likely to make the rewards for the portrayed violence more direct and salient as well.

“Violent videogames may also have a stronger effect on aggressive behavior than films or television because these games often allow the player to rehearse the entire aggression sequence. A player may be required to look for threats, identify them, make a decision, and take aggressive action in a game, whereas television or film observer may not rehearse all of these steps in watching a film or television show. By developing more complete aggressive scripts, future aggressive behavior becomes more likely.

“The overall rate of violence tends to be higher in violent videogames than violent films and television shows. Even films and television shows with generally violent themes often spend a decent amount of time in non-violent plot development. Many videogames, on the other hand, contain non-stop violence. This difference in the quantity of violence is likely to make the effect of videogame violence stronger than that of television and film.”¹⁵

The evidence suggest that computer games likely to be rated R18+ for violence would have a more significant effect on consumers than films rated R18+ for violence. This evidence justifies a difference between films and computer games in the classification system, which allows an R18+ classification for films but not for computer games.

4. Conclusion and recommendation

In the light of the evidence demonstrating adverse effects from violent computer games, the answer to the question posed by the discussion paper **Should the Australian National Classification Scheme include an R 18+ classification category for computer games?** is **Definitely not.**

Recommendation:

No R18+ classification category for computer games should be introduced to the Australian National Classification Scheme. Computer games which exceed the provisions of the MA15+ classification should continue to be categorised as Refused Classification.

5. Endnotes

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