



**Submission to the
Joint Select Committee on Cyber-Safety**

July 14, 2010

Interactive Games & Entertainment Association Ltd

The Interactive Games & Entertainment Association is an industry association serving the business and public affairs needs of companies in Australia that publish, market and distribute computer and video games for video game consoles, handheld devices, personal computers and the Internet.

Thank you for your invitation to make a submission to the Australian Parliament's Joint Select Committee's inquiry into cyber-safety issues affecting children and young people.

The Interactive Games & Entertainment Association is an industry association servicing the business and public affairs needs of companies in Australia and New Zealand that publish, market and distribute computer and video games for video games consoles, handheld devices, personal computers and the Internet.

iGEA members include Australia's leading interactive entertainment software publishers and distributors, which collectively account for more than ninety five percent of the \$2 billion in entertainment boxed software, peripheral and hardware sales in Australia in 2009.

See Attachment 3 for a list of iGEA Australian members.

The following submission is specifically aimed at commenting on cyber safety issues as they relate to computer and video games. While some observations may be made in a more general sense, observations and considerations are specifically game-centric.

It should also be noted that as a member of The Australian Government's Consultative Working Group on Cyber-safety, we are part of a much more comprehensive submission which is also being submitted to the Committee

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Who is Gaming?

In 2008, 88% of Australian households had a device for playing computer games, with 84% of Australians aged between 16-25 being computer game players. Half of these gamers play either daily or every other day. 63% of these play for up to an hour at a time; with only 5% playing for four or more hours in one sitting.¹

70% of parents in game households play computer and video games and 80% of these parents play them with their children.²

What is Online Gaming?

An online game is one that is played over some form of live computer network; in this context the 'network' is the internet. Online games can be as simple as a text based game (puzzles and word games), a translation of traditional card or board games (chess, bridge, *Monopoly*) or as complex as a virtual world (*World of Warcraft*) which hosts thousands of users in a rich and complex virtual environment.

These games may be played through gaming consoles (PlayStation, Wii, Xbox), hand held devices (PSP, Nintendo DS), mobile devices (iPhone, Smart Phones), personal computers and other emerging technologies (iPads).

Simply stated, "Online gaming is a technology rather than a genre; a mechanism for connecting players together rather than a particular pattern of gameplay."³

¹ Brand, Borchard, Holmes, *Interactive Australia 2009*, Centre for New Media Research, Bond University, Qld 2008

² *ibid.*

³ Rollings and Adams, *Fundamentals of Game Design*, Prentice Hall, 2006

A glossary of online game types are listed in Attachment 2.

The Online Environment

New and evolving technologies are central to the lives of children and young people. They are adapted, and discarded, rapidly and often indiscriminately. As 'online natives' children and young people are born into an era where the terms 'offline' and 'online' are differentiated only by other generations; in their world the two are intrinsically morphed simply into one universe where the borders are decidedly blurred and differentiation is moot.

The cyber (or online) world is one in which children and young people should be granted the same levels of freedoms with which to explore and interact, but with the same levels of caution that exist in the 'real' world. Children and young people need the tools, confidence, education and support to traverse their universe in relative safety.

As gamers, children and young people are straddling both worlds; they are increasingly playing games and interacting with real people through an online medium. This exposes them to the fruits of the world way beyond their physical environment and the potential dangers that this also brings.

Online enabled gaming allows players to interact and compete with others in real-time, making it an exciting, social and immersive experience. Often live communication is involved, such as voice or text chat features.

As with interacting in a physical environment (school yards, parks etc) there are steps parents and caregivers must take to minimise the risk inherent with interactions with friends, peers and strangers in the cyber landscape.

Inappropriate Health and Social Behaviours

Millions of Australians play video games with little if any negative social or health implications. Computer and video games are part of normal media choices made within households everyday in Australia. Traditional media is giving way to newer forms of digital entertainment, with the internet the first choice for media leisure. The findings of research conducted on this point suggests that gaming is not a substitute for outdoor or non-media activities. Rather time consumed in gaming reduced more traditional forms of media consumption such as television viewing⁴

It should be noted that the cyber world offers a generally safe and enjoyable experience for the vast majority of the population. Those who exhibit dependency or other inappropriate tendencies and behaviours are likely to have had a pre-existing predisposition to such behaviours with the cyber world merely being the vehicle through such traits are manifest.

Kutner and Olsen highlight that identifying these inappropriate behaviours which manifest in playing online (and offline) games assists in uncovering underlying problems that may exist in children and young people, such as depression.⁵

⁴ Brand, Borcard, Holmes, *Interactive Australia 2009*, Centre for New Media Research, Bond University, Qld 2008

⁵ Kutner & Olson 2008, *Grand Theft Childhood*, Simon & Schuster, New York, NY

They go on to offer a caution that perhaps perceived inappropriate behaviours within the online environment (as opposed to those acted out in the 'real' world) are not specifically a reflection of a child's beliefs or behaviour pattern. Instead, the child or young person may be 'exploring what it feels like to be someone who has different values from his/her own and different perceptions of the world'.⁶

General thoughts and observations for consideration

- Interactions with various media types in the 'real' world are largely controlled with varying degrees of classification or censorship and generally under the umbrella of a government body. However, the current systems in place lack the robustness and flexibility to reflect and adapt to the current online environment.

The classifiable elements used to assist parents in making age appropriate decisions for their children (themes, sex, language, violence, drug use and nudity) only go so far in addressing the additional elements which apply in an online environment. Elements including privacy, moderation, walled environments, links to external sites and the overall gaming experience also impact heavily on a game's age appropriateness.

- Any consideration regarding cyber-safety needs to acknowledge that there is a great difference between a 6 year old and a 17 year old in terms of safety precautions and it would be inappropriate to apply some of the more protective/restrictive measures equally to children and young people.

Research carried out by the Entertainment and Leisure Software Publishers Association has suggested that parents find that once a child is 13, then it's not deemed to be worth fighting over access to 'age appropriate' games and other content due to the other competing, and more important, battles such as alcohol use, drug abuse and under age sex.⁷

If the veracity of this finding is accepted (and we don't hold claim either way), there is an argument that any education needs to be tailored towards children to instil behaviours in them as to do so at a later age may compete with other more immediate issues as young people reach teenage years.

- Given such a rapid convergence of different forms of media, video games are quite well-positioned in terms of giving parents the ability to protect their children's online activities. Parental controls are becoming increasingly robust (already being among the most robust for any form of media), and those available, for example, via Xbox are actually applicable to a number of different types of media access, including movies, games, the Internet and various online-enabled features and functions like limiting who children can play with, when and for how long.
- Unlike many other online spaces, those in video games tend to be carefully monitored and moderated (to the degree possible). With help from community vigilance these spaces have worked to enforce acceptable standards of interaction and behaviour.
- User generated content is difficult, if not impossible, for ratings and parental controls to contend with in online-enabled games. Public education must be a vital component to any online safety

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ ELSPA, *Classification of Video Games: Research Presentation*, Sept 2008

strategy so as to prepare parents and children with the information, tools and "netiquette" to stay safe online.

- Online-safety concerns span borders and regulatory boundaries. The tools and resources that the industry makes available must be promoted and supported internationally and we must partner wherever possible to educate the public about the steps they can take to protect children and young people online.
- All the above being said, experience is more often the best teacher. Parents, caregivers and educators should be encouraged to try playing games, both online and side-by-side on the couch with children and young people to get a first-hand experience of the joys and pitfalls that are possible.

The Interactive Games & Entertainment Association welcomes the opportunity to work further with the Joint Select Committee on Cyber Safety to ensure the safety of children and young people engaging in the online environment.

CONTACT

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Attachment 1
Relevant Industry Material on Online Gaming
(A copy of each will be provided on CD Rom)

askaboutgames.com

Main Site

www.askaboutgames.com

A Guide to Online Gaming for Parents, and
Safe Online Gaming Tips for Children

http://www.askaboutgames.com/assets/GoodOnlineGamingGuide_AAG.pdf

Parental Controls

<http://askaboutgames.com/?c=/pages/parentalLocks.jsp>

PEGI Online (Pan European Game Information)

Main Site

<http://www.pegionline.eu/en/index/id/234/>

ESRB (Entertainment Software Rating Board)

Main Site

<http://www.esrb.org/index-js.jsp>

A Parent's Guide to Video Games, Parental Controls and Online Safety

http://www.esrb.org/about/news/downloads/ESRB_PTA_Brochure-web_version.pdf

Family Discussion Guide

http://www.esrb.org/about/news/downloads/Family_Discussion_Guide.pdf

Examples of websites that provide information on parental controls:

- Microsoft Xbox Family Settings
- Nintendo Wii Parental Controls
- Sony PlayStation Knowledge Center
- Microsoft Windows Vista Family Settings
- Mac OS X Leopard
- Parental Controls Product Guide (GetParentalControls.org)

Attachment 2

Online Game Categories

Game styles and genres change rapidly so it is difficult to be precise, but currently there are four main types of games played online.

Minigames / Browser games

These are online versions of classic arcade, board or digital games. They are usually free and often available on websites and gaming portals supported by advertising. These games are mainly single player and do not involve a virtual, narrative world. *Spacewar*, *PacMan*, as well as card games such as *Solitaire* and *Blackjack* are common examples and these types make up the majority of games played online.

Advergames

Advergames are designed to promote a particular product, company or political perspective. Advergames usually feature a company's product prominently and will either be played online on the company's website or will be available for download. They are strongly linked to viral marketing campaigns, with the games attempting to spread product and company awareness by word of mouth, e-mail and by featuring in blogs.

Network Games

These games are usually played online with a PC, but increasingly players are using gaming consoles with Internet access. Their popularity has increased with flat-rate Internet access and readily available broadband technology. They cover the majority of game genres but the main style of play is tactical combat such as first-person shooter games which are characterized by an on-screen view that provides the game character's point of view. Players can compete head-to-head or in teams. One of the most popular games in this category is *Call of Duty*.

Real-time strategy games using tactical planning are a computer-based development of traditional war games while network multiplayer gaming is also very popular in various sports games such as racing and football.

Massively Multiplayer Games

Massively multiplayer games differ from other online games in two ways: (1) the large number of concurrent players participating in a single game, and (2) the persistent nature of the games (i.e. play continues whether a particular gamer is participating or not).

These games offer a rich three-dimensional world populated with thousands of gamers. Blizzard Entertainment/Vivendi Game's *World of Warcraft* has over 6 million subscribers (1 million in Europe and over 1.5 million in China). *Everquest*, which was once considered the market leader, has approximately 500,000 subscribers, and *Ultima Online* has 250,000.

Role-playing games where participants assume the roles of fictional characters and collaboratively create or follow stories are dominant in this category. They tend to provide a more open-ended approach to gaming, and are notable for the social and community aspects made available through the service. Consequently, these games are widely known as Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPG).

Attachment 3
Australian Members

[Activision Blizzard](#)

[Disney Interactive Studios](#)

[Electronic Arts](#)

[Microsoft](#)

[Mindscape](#)

[Namco-Bandai Partners](#)

[Nintendo](#)

[QVS International](#)

[SEGA](#)

[Sony Computer Entertainment](#)

[Take 2 Interactive](#)

[THQ Asia Pacific](#)

[Ubisoft](#)

[Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment](#)