Submission

on the

Classification (Publications, Films and Computer Games) Amendment (R 18+ Computer Games) Bill 2012

to the

Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee

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1. Summary

In the past, computer games with a classification that would be higher than MA15+ have been refused classification in Australia because their interactive nature means that violent/explicit games have a much greater impact on the player than films with similar content have on the viewer.

The Classification (Publications, Films and Computer Games) Amendment (R 18+ Computer Games) Bill 2012 does not allow for this difference in impact – it simply provides for an additional R18+ category for computer games.

There is nothing in the Bill which would ensure that a new R18+ category does not contain more violent or explicit games than those currently allowed in the MA15+ category. The draft guidelines drawn up last year by the Department of Home Affairs fail to achieve this aim.

Many parents who signed petitions in favour of an additional R18+ games category last year did so because they were concerned about the level of violence in MA15+ games played by their teenage children. Such parents wanted these games classified R18+ to indicate that they were intended for adults only.

However the legislation before the Committee would not require any games currently classified MA15+ to be reclassified as R18+. Rather, by treating games in exactly the same way as films, the Bill could open the way for games with a far greater and more dangerous impact to be available in this country, while still allowing minors to legally access harmful material rated MA15+. The Bill would therefore not be in the best interests of the nation's children.

We strongly support the submission by Michelle Scott, Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, who states:

> ***I do not support the introduction of an R18+ classification category for computer games because of:***
>
> - ***The increased availability of, and risk of exposure to, high impact content including violence, domestic and sexual violence and illicit drug use;***
> - ***The potential negative impacts of exposure to R18+ computer games, particularly for vulnerable or at risk children, and***
> - ***The difficulties parents and regulators experience in monitoring and controlling children's access to computer games.***

We note that the Australian Council for Children and the Media and the Australian Christian Lobby also share these concerns.

> ***Recommendation:***
>
> ***The Bill should be rejected, or its passage delayed until such time as the 2011 draft guidelines are amended to ensure that:***
>
> - ***there is no dilution of the current Refused Classification category for computer games, and***
> - ***games currently classified MA15+ which are at the higher end of this category are reclassified as R18+.***

Below is a summary of evidence relating to violence in computer games.

2. Effects of violent computer 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.[1]

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."[2]

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. This effect occurs in the two very different cultural contexts of the United Sates and Japan. The research contradicted the popular hypothesis that only aggressive children become more aggressive from playing violent video games.[3]

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.[4]

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."[5]

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;[6]
- increased play of a violent first person shooter video game can significantly increase aggression;[7]
- 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;[8]
- video game violence exposure was associated with stronger pro-violence attitudes in 4th and 5th graders;[9]

- 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;[10]

- 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. Mediational pathways were found such that hostility mediated the relationship between violent video game exposure and outcomes.[11]

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".[12]

In a 2010 meta-analysis of studies on computer game violence Anderson and colleagues concluded that "the evidence 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."[13]

Reviewing this meta-analysis L Rowell Huesmann comments:

> *About 38 years ago, Jesse Steinfeld, then Surgeon General of the United States, reviewed the research that had been conducted to date on the effects of TV violence on youth behavior. He stated in testimony before Congress, "It is clear to me that the causal relationship between [exposure to] televised violence and antisocial behavior is sufficient to warrant appropriate and immediate remedial action… There comes a time when the data are sufficient to justify action. That time has come" (Steinfeld, 1972, pp. 25–27). With the evidence provided by Anderson et al. (2010), it would now be fair to make the same statement about violent video games.*
>
> *It is time for the public health establishment to accept the fact that playing violent video games increases the "risk" that the player will behave more aggressively.*[14]

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

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".[15]

There are three reasons why the effect of violence from playing a computer game is likely to be greater that from viewing a film:

- in playing a computer game the player often identifies with the aggressor;

- in playing a computer game the player often rehearses the whole sequence of aggression; and

- in violent computer games the proportion of the game devoted to violence is higher than for most violent 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."[16]

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, no changes should be made to the classification of computer games that would allow the sale of games more violent than those currently available.

Recommendation:

The Bill should be rejected, or its passage delayed until such time as the 2011 draft guidelines are amended to ensure that:

- ***there is no dilution of the current Refused Classification category for computer games, and***
- ***games currently classified MA15+ which are at the higher end of this category are reclassified as R18+.***

5. Endnotes

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