

Submission to the Attorney General's Department

For the consultation on the question:

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

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The introduction of an R18+ classification for computer games sold in Australia would ameliorate the “crisis of control” that exists for computer game consumption, production and distribution in Australia today. In this submission, we offer a brief conceptual analysis with which to answer “Yes” to the policy question, “Should the Australian National Classification Scheme include an R 18+ classification category for computer games?”.

In this submission, we will not address the standard issues raised by the questions in the discussion paper and consultation template. We have given our short responses to those questions at the end of this document and we will defer to the perspectives of others on those questions. Rather, our goal is to introduce a distinctive position that we believe enhances the debate and offers a lens through which to see the efficacy of an R18+ in contemporary Australian society.

As an academic research centre, The Centre for New Media Research at Bond University has engaged in public policy matters with respect to classification since 2001. Our engagement has been data-driven and our contribution to empirical evidence is cited in the Discussion Paper: *Should the Australian National Classification Scheme include an R 18+ classification category for computer games?*. Indeed, our research record includes *A Review of the Classification Guidelines for Films and Computer Games: Assessment of Public Submissions on the Discussion Paper and Draft Revised Guidelines* for the Office of Film and Literature Classification in 2001, *Sources of News and Current Affairs* for the (then) Australian Broadcasting Authority (2001), *A Comparative Analysis of Classification Schemes in 22 Nations* (2002) for the (then) OFLC, *Living Diversity* (2002) and *Connecting Diversity* for the Special Broadcasting Service, *A Review of the Children’s Television Standards* (2008) for the Australian Communications and Media Authority, and most prominently, a series of national empirical studies on computer

game demographics and attitudes for the Interactive Entertainment Association of Australia (now the Interactive Games and Entertainment Association), *GamePlay Australia* (2005), *Interactive Australia 2007*, *Interactive Australia 2009*. The Centre also publishes research independent of government and industry policy matters including research on computer game history, narrative, form and style.

The thesis we advance is simple. The introduction of an R18+ classification for computer games sold in Australia will legitimate the National Classification Scheme. In the absence of an R18+, the National Classification Scheme has progressively lost currency. Consequently, an emergent “crisis of control” has eroded the potency and utility of the Scheme.

Our argument is predicated on the award-winning book by University of Southern California Annenberg School for Communication scholar, James R. Beniger’s *The Control Revolution: Technological and Economic Origins of the Information Society* (Harvard University Press, 1986) now in its third printing. As a work of deep scholarship explaining forces of social and political change and their interplay with technologies, particularly communications media, it remains a predictive, adaptable basis for considering the tensions that arise from emerging innovations.

Beniger contributes to the R18+ debate by explaining how the evolution of the material economy continuously produces “crises of control” solved by innovations of process, policy and technology. In the absence of resolution to a “crisis of control” a state of ambiguity exists in the material economy.

For example, the introduction of The Commonwealth Classification (Publications, Films and Computer Games) Act 1995 addressed the “crisis of control” that emerged from the growing popularity of computer games in the decade leading up to the early 1990s. The

material economy of computer games has not and never will be static and as a result, their growing popularity, sophistication and complexity have led to new “crises of control,” particularly related to their evolution toward an adult, rather than child, medium.

Since the introduction of the National Classification Scheme in 1995, amendments have responded to these crises including the combining of different Classification Guidelines for films and games into one set of Guidelines, creating common classification types for films and computer games, and changing the determined markings for these. These changes were, in effect, responses to “crises of control” brought on by the intersection of the new National Classification Scheme and the ongoing material changes in the economy of computer game production and reception. In general, amendments to the Act have been a response to the maturation of the game form and its audience and have sought to resolve the “crisis of control” created by these changes and the stability of the National Classification Code which in 1995 sought to distinguish between the rights of adults to “read, hear and see what they want,” and the protection of minors “from material likely to harm or disturb them.”

The “crisis of control” underlying this consultation on whether Australia should introduce another amendment to the Act and establish an R18+ classification for computer games represents ongoing changes to the material economy of computer games. Informed by history and guided by the clarity of Beniger’s thesis (and evidence) of the control revolution, is that an R18+ classification is an innovation that ameliorates the current crisis.

Beniger predicts that not innovating in a “crisis of control” produces retrograde effects, returning the material economy to a condition of dysfunction. In other words, not

introducing an R18+ for computer games at this moment in our history has the great potential to exacerbate the “crisis of control” and cause further market ambiguity. In practical terms, the crisis will destabilise the currency of the National Classification Scheme.

Beniger’s model of the control revolution is predicated on “four complex and interrelated ... technological and economic arrangements” including innovations for the control of consumption, innovations for the control of production, innovations for the control of distribution and innovations for the “more generalised control of the entire material economy.” We apply these arrangements to computer games and the National Classification Scheme to explain our view that an R18+ classification for games is imperative to reduce and avoid untenable market ambiguity.

- 1) With respect to consumption of computer games, audience desire for content that would fall into the category of R18+ will increase over time, regardless of whether or not the National Classification Scheme is modified. At present, ambiguity of consumption exists where adults seek content consistent with their tastes and maturity. Earlier media forms demonstrate this point. Ambiguity of consumption is more problematic where parents seek guidance in making choices about content appropriate for their children.

- 2) With respect to production of computer games, developers will meet the market for games that would fall into the category of R18+ by producing them in line with demand. At present, ambiguity of production exists where creative artists question the commercial and legal viability of producing work that addresses adult concerns whereas filmmakers, for example, do not grapple with this dilemma because R18+ is available for film classification.

- 3) With respect to distribution of computer games, publishers and retailers will meet the market for games that would fall into the category of R18+ by distributing them physically and online. Ambiguity of distribution relates to the migration of computer game distribution from bricks-and-mortar businesses to online businesses and the intersection of this migration with international trade and the complex co-regulatory regime applied in Australia.

- 4) With respect to significance as a proxy for generalised control, computer games today are seen as entertainment products. However, as consumption, production and distribution of entertainment computer games plateau for adult consumers, producers and distributors of computer games will experiment with “serious games” that will feature in other aspects of the social ecology including education, industry, science, art, religion and politics. In these domains, games will likely be exempt from classification. However, until that time, exploration will force R18+ classification (if available) where material is appropriate only for mature specialist audiences. Eventually, games will contribute to society in ways they might not in the absence of an R18+ classification. An analogous historical basis for our argument is the popularity of the “penny novel” or “dime novel,” the rise of popular literacy, and the eventual efficacy of the textbook for formal learning.

In conclusion, the Australian National Classification Scheme should include an R18+ classification category for computer games because the current “crisis of control” over this communication medium, the computer game, and consequent ambiguities in

consumption, production, distribution and significance erodes the potency, currency and legitimacy of the national scheme. An R18+ will restore control.

Reference

Beniger, James R. *The Control Revolution: Technological and Economic Origins of the Information Society*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986.

PERSONAL INFORMATION and TEMPLATE QUESTION RESPONSES

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Country of Residence: Australia (both)*

Do you play computer or video games?: yes (both)

How frequently do you play?

Weekly (both)

How long do you play in an average session?

30-60 minutes (both)

Confidentiality requested?: no

THE QUESTION

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

YES

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***

5) strongly agree

- ***The R 18+ classification category sends a clear, unambiguous message to parents that the game material is unsuitable for minors***

5) strongly agree

- ***Consistent classification categories for films and computer games are easier to understand***

5) strongly agree

- ***A new classification will supplement technological controls on minors' access to age-inappropriate computer games***

5) strongly agree

- ***Comparable classification systems internationally have an adult rating for computer games - international parity is desirable***

5) strongly agree

- ***Consumers access games which would be R 18+ illegally – it would be better if they were legally available with appropriate restrictions***

5) strongly agree

- ***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

- ***It would be difficult for parents to enforce age restrictions for computer games.***

1) strongly disagree

- ***Minors would be more likely to be exposed to computer games that are unsuitable for them.***

1) strongly disagree

- *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

- *There is no demonstrated need to change existing restrictions.*

1) strongly disagree