

Should Australia have an R 18+ classification for video games?

The subject of whether video games with mature or adult content should be restricted from sale in Australia represents a complex social issue. Under the current classification system for video games, any game deemed unsuitable for people under the age of 15 is banned from sale in Australia. With reference to relevant supporting literature, this paper presents a critical summary of the arguments for and against the introduction of an R 18+ rating for video games. Analysis of the key issues reveals that the R 18+ rating issue encompasses matters of accessibility versus restriction of adult material, censorship versus freedom of creative expression, parental versus governmental responsibility, among many other considerations. It is concluded that the known benefits outweigh the perceived but empirically insubstantial risks of introducing an R 18+ rating for video games in Australia.

by Daniel King
& Paul Delfabbro

There is currently debate in Australia on the issue of whether certain video games that feature adult content (e.g. high-level violence, drug use or sexual content) should receive an “adults only” rating. In contrast to the USA and the UK, Australia currently has no classification code for rating adult video games equivalent to its R 18+ rating for film and literature. Among some health professionals, media researchers, government officials and lobby groups, there is concern that adult video games pose a risk to the Australian population, particularly youth users. This concern underlies the current policy and practice in Australia of not classifying video games with adult content in order to prevent their domestic sale. In order for the R 18+ rating to be introduced, there must be a consensus of the Standing Committee of Attorneys-General. At present, the South Australian Attorney-General, Michael Atkinson MP, opposes the introduction of this rating. Under the current system, video games that feature content deemed to be unsuitable for persons aged over 15 years are “refused classification” (RC) by the Office of Film and Literature Classification (OFLC) Board, thereby making them illegal to sell in Australia. To date, over 30 video games have been refused classification in Australia. This raises a question of debate: Is the current rating system justified in its refusal to classify video games with explicit adult content?

Video game playing is an increasingly popular leisure activity in Australia. Recent studies by Brand (2007, 2009) reported that 88% of Australian households have a device for playing computer or video

games, and 68% of the Australian population had played video games at least once in the past 12 months. With regard to playing habits, Brand reported that 50% of Australian players play games either daily or every other day, and the most common playing session is one hour in duration. The video game industry is also economically significant in Australia. In the 2008–2009 fiscal year, Australian consumers spent over \$800 million on video game software, which was an 8% increase in sales from the previous year. In November 2009, the video game *Call of duty: Modern warfare 2* (Infinity Ward / Activision) became one of the highest selling entertainment products in history. Over 4.7 million copies of the game were sold in the first 24 hours of release, and its revenue exceeded the opening weekend box office takings of popular Hollywood films such as *The dark knight* or any film from the *Harry Potter* or *Twilight* series. It is clear, therefore, that video games are a significant part of the cultural landscape in Australia.

In examining the divide in opinion on the R 18+ video game rating issue, it is worthwhile to consider briefly the broader discourse on the subject of video game technology. Some of the practical uses of video game technology have included as an interactive teaching aid for engaging students in the classroom (Gee 2002), as an assistive technology in medical practice (Kato et al. 2008), as a simulation training tool for the military (Prensky 2003), and as an adjunct for psychotherapy in a clinical setting (Gardner 1991). However, psychological research tends to focus on the negative effects of playing video games, including possible “addiction” (Salguero & Moran 2002), increased aggression after playing violent video games (Anderson & Dill 2000), and the negative health consequences resulting from excessive video game playing (King & Delfabbro 2009). It is not surprising, therefore, that social approval of video game technologies varies according to how and in what context the technologies are used.

This paper aims to provide a critical summary of the arguments for and against the introduction of an R 18+ rating for video games in Australia. It will be apparent that the R 18+ rating issue is complex, and encompasses matters of accessibility versus restriction of adult material, censorship versus freedom of creative expression,

and parental versus governmental responsibility, among many other key issues. The need for a structured review of this debate arises from three main background factors: first, the video game R 18+ rating issue is steeped in various social, political, economic and moral arguments that are often difficult to individually separate from each other, which has had the undesirable effect of confusing or linking together unrelated issues. Second, the discourse has, until recently, largely been of an informal nature, with the viewpoints of concerned parties expressed through communication in the public domain via letters, print media and online “blogs” and opinion articles. Third, individuals’ personal feelings of approval (or disapproval) of video game technology have often distracted from or otherwise negatively affected the objectivity and coherency of the debate. This paper is intended to provide a formal vehicle for the discussion of the many views that have emerged on both sides of the R 18+ rating debate. The paper summarises both the arguments in favour of, and those against, the introduction of an R 18+ rating for video games in Australia. Relevant literature will also be referred to as a means of articulating or supporting each viewpoint.

Arguments in favour

1. The average video game player in Australia is over the age of 18

The stereotypical image of a video game player is often male, aged between 12 and 17, living at home with his parents. However, in the past 15 years, demographic research suggests a much more diverse profile of the video game playing population. Research conducted in Australia (e.g. Brand 2007, 2009) has reported that the average Australian video game player is 30 years old and has been playing video games for 11 years. In addition, over 40% of players are female. The profile of video game players is even more complex in studies of online video games. Research suggests that a significant segment of people who play online video games are aged over 45 years, have university qualifications, work full time, and often play video games as a means of meeting other adults (Griffiths, Davies & Chappell 2004). It is clear, therefore, that the stereotype of the adolescent

male player may be ill-informed. In other words, a large proportion of the global video game playing community, including the Australian population, is of an adult age (i.e. over the age of 18 years).

In Australia, persons aged over 18 are granted various legal rights. With regard to entertainment choices, an adult is able to purchase a ticket to view a film rated R 18+, purchase an R-rated book or magazine, or visit various adult-only establishments. The argument may be put forward, therefore, that the lack of an R 18+ rating for video games is inconsistent with the various other legal freedoms granted to Australian adults, not only with regard to major life choices, like voting, drinking, smoking or getting married, but also in terms of the entertainment media choices available freely for adult consumption.

2. Consistency of classification of video games in relation to film and literature classification

In Australia, the OFLC Board is responsible for the classification of video games. The OFLC Board is an independent statutory body that makes decisions on the ratings for films, publications and video games by following a National Classification Code. This code is informed primarily by the *Classification (Publications, Films and Computer Games) Act 1995*. Under Section 17 of the Act, a video game may be given one of five classifications: G (for general audiences), PG (parental guidance recommended), M (for mature audiences), or MA15+ (for persons aged 15 years and over). Additionally, a video game may be refused classification (RC), which results in the sale of that video game being illegal in Australia. Film and literature may also be refused classification, but, unlike video games, film and literature of an adult nature have the additional classification categories of R 18+ and X 18+ (for “high impact themes, violence, sexual content and drug use”) under Section 20 of the Act.

The code states that classification decisions aim to balance a number of guiding principles, including that adults should be able to read, hear and see what they want; minors should be protected from material likely to harm or disturb them; everyone should be protected from exposure to unsolicited material that they find offensive; and the need to take account

of community concerns. Irrespective of each principle’s individual merits, it is evident that these principles advance socially desirable but mutually exclusive notions of freedom, choice and protection with regard to media consumption. These principles may only be interpreted subjectively and are intended as a guide; the application of these principles is at the discretion of the OFLC Board.

The code’s principles enable the board to assign an R 18+ rating to film and literature that feature content of an adult nature. The R 18+ rating also prevents their sale to young people (i.e. minors are protected from this material). Therefore, with regard to adult film and publications, the code is flexible in protecting minors while also allowing this material to be available to persons aged over 18 years (i.e. it allows adults to read, hear and see what they want, within the limits of the R 18+ classification). It should be noted again that films and literature can be “refused” classification for featuring high-level content (i.e. an R 18+ rating does not equate with “anything goes”). The classification code’s guiding principles appear to operate differently with respect to video games. Specifically, it may be argued that the first principle, which states that adults should be able to read, hear and see what they want, carries less weight. A video game can only be approved for sale in Australia if it is considered suitable for a person aged 15 years. As a result, the lack of an R 18+ classification means that Australian adults have less choice in what they read, hear and see in a video game.

3. The impact of censorship on the video game industry

While some people are opposed to the notion that video games represent a legitimate art form that is comparable to film and literature, most would agree that video games are a form of creative expression. When a video game is refused classification (RC) in Australia, it could be said that the creative expression within that game is suppressed. Following a RC decision from the OFLC Board, the publisher of a video game may take one of the following options: accept this decision and not sell the game in the Australian marketplace; appeal this decision and request reclassification within 30 days; or modify

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the content of the video game in line with the board's recommendations. The decision to appeal or modify the game content places a burden on the applicant in terms of both time and money and/or resources (i.e. lodging an application for review and the development costs associated with altering the video game content). After modifying an adult video game, it is possible that the creative work of one or more persons involved in the video game will be entirely removed.

A major concern among video game developers is that the creative potential of the video game medium is inhibited by the code's requirement that video games must be suitable for adolescent users. This restriction is viewed by developers as particularly limiting because, as stated previously, the Australian video game consumer market is predominantly of adult age. For developers of video games with "mature" content, their product must compete against similar entertainment products that contain adult themes and content. As a recent example, the video game *Left 4 dead 2* (Valve), an action/horror game featuring zombies, was refused classification in Australia (date of classification: 23/09/2009) for its depiction of high-level violence, including decapitation. The game was later released in an edited version that contained significantly less blood, reduced fire effects, no decapitation or limb removal, and enemy bodies that disappeared instantly upon "dying" rather than lying on the ground. The developer, Valve, expressed concern that: the creative content in the edited version would not compare favourably to other entertainment media in the horror genre, such as zombie horror films, and that the changes to the game would affect its commercial viability in the Australian market.

Another concern among video game developers is that if a video game is denied classification in Australia, this may increase the likelihood of consumers illegally downloading or obtaining pirated copies of the game from overseas. While it is difficult to measure accurately the impact of piracy on the industry, the Interactive Games and Entertainment Association has estimated that local Australian games retailers lose \$21.8 million and suppliers lose \$4.3 million each year as a result of piracy (Allen Consulting Group 2003). As evidence of the vulnerability of the Australian market

to piracy, Brand (2009) reported that 10% of Australian video game players owned a pirated video game in their collection, and 41% would purchase a pirated video game at a discount of 75% or less. If a video game with adult content cannot be sold in Australian retail stores, then consumers may download or otherwise procure an illegal copy of the video game. The lack of an R 18+ rating, therefore, represents a substantial financial problem for Australian retailers and suppliers.

4. The general public is in favour of an R rating for video games

A key principle of the Australian Classification Code is that film, literature and video games should be rated in accordance with the need to take account of community concerns. A study by Brand, Borchard and Holmes (2009) surveyed a random sample of 1,614 Australian adults about their video game playing patterns and attitudes to video games. The researchers reported that 91% of the sample (including both gamers and non-gamers) were in favour of introducing an R 18+ rating for video games. Respondents in favour of the R 18+ rating reported that the adult rating would make it easier to identify video games that were unsuitable for some family members, and the rating system would allow greater consistency with the film and literature rating system. A 2007 research report prepared for the federal Attorney-General's Department, entitled *Classification decisions and community standards*, found that 28% of the Australian public incorrectly believed that there was an R 18+ rating for video games already in place. Interviews with non-video game players revealed that 22% thought that the current MA 15+ rating for video games was too lenient for some games, with violent content being treated too mildly, and the MA 15+ rating granted children access to some games too easily. Brand (2007) also found that 62% of Australian consumers did not know the difference between the M rating and the MA 15+ rating for video games. On the basis of these findings, it may be argued that the community is generally concerned by the inconsistency of the current rating system for video games, as well as the confusion this presents when purchasing video games personally or for others.

5. Young people's media consumption is an issue of parental responsibility

According to Michael Atkinson (2009), the current South Australian Attorney-General, the primary reason for blocking the introduction of an R 18+ rating in Australia is to protect youth from harmful exposure to adult video games. However, this approach does not acknowledge the important role of parents as sentinels for monitoring the media habits of their children. Brand, Borchard and Holmes' (2009) study reported that 78% of the parents in their sample were present when games were purchased for their children and 92% stated that they were aware of the games that are played in their homes. Further, 80% of adults consulted a classification guide when choosing games for children. Research shows, therefore, that parents are generally concerned by the media choices made by their children, and they want to ensure that media is age-appropriate for them. Personal computers and modern video game console machines (e.g. Xbox 360) have sophisticated child "lock out" technology that can prevent unauthorised use of video games with mature content, but such systems are only effective if the owner knows how to operate them (i.e. sets up a password). Therefore, the argument follows that, rather than preventing the sale of adult video games entirely, it is more logical to provide better and less ambiguous information to parents to help them make suitable media choices for their children. A complementary strategy may be to commission advertising targeted at parents that explains the ratings system and how to use "lock out" technologies to minimise the exposure of children to adult video games. Although, admittedly, children may find ways to circumvent this technology, such measures are more in line with the controls often recommended for the protection of children from inappropriate online content.

6. The protection of underage persons from video games with adult content

A common argument against the introduction of an R 18+ rating for video games is that this rating would increase underage involvement in adult video games (Atkinson 2009). However, the counter-argument is that many youth in Australia are already able to access video games

with adult content. Doe (2009) has argued that many video games currently rated MA 15+ in Australia have received more restrictive classification ratings in other jurisdictions such as the USA and the UK. He states that over 90% of video games classified MA 15+ between June and November in 2009 were rated M 17+ in the USA. For example, the popular video game *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Softworks) is rated MA 15+ in Australia for strong violence, drug references and coarse language. In the USA and the UK, this video game is rated M 17+ and 18+, respectively. The lack of an R 18+ classification in Australia means numerous video games that are widely considered to be "adults only" in overseas jurisdictions are being rated suitable for 15-year-old users in this country. The introduction of an R 18+ rating would enable more effective protection of underage youth from video games with mature content, rather than allowing these games to be rated inappropriately and go "under the radar" under the current ratings system.

Arguments against

1. Explicit adult content should be censored on moral grounds

One argument against the R 18+ video game classification stems from the intuition that certain adult video games are morally reprehensible in some way, and should therefore be banned or censored. Specifically, there is a concern that players of video games are able to engage in simulated immoral acts, such as assault, murder, theft and fraud. McCormick (2001) outlined three common moral objections to adult video games: the Kantian argument, which states that people should treat each other with respect in line with the Categorical Imperative, and therefore no "harm" should be inflicted on others in a virtual setting; the Aristotelian argument, which states that engaging in immoral acts erodes a person's moral character or value; and the utilitarian argument, which states that a person committing immoral acts in a video game may be at greater risk of committing similar acts in a real-life setting.

McCormick argues that the Kantian argument is insufficient on the grounds that individuals may disrespect and/or cause injury

to others in many activities, such as sport, and to oppose video games purely on this basis is a form of discrimination. He argues that the utilitarian argument is also unconvincing due to the lack of empirical data that shows a causal link between the act of playing video games and committing real-life actions that harm others. McCormick (2001) concludes, therefore, that:

Our moral intuitions that simulating violence in our entertainment predisposes us to real violence are confused and inconsistent with a wide range of other activities that we find morally acceptable. (p.286)

McCormick argues that the strongest moral argument against playing adult video games is drawn from value ethics (i.e. violent video games may affect a person's moral character). He states that this perspective provides us with the vocabulary to describe the objections that many people have to the depictions of violence, drug use and sexual acts in video games. However, the value ethics approach is also significantly limited by the subjective nature of such value judgements – in other words, some people may be offended by the content and the actions that players can simulate in a particular video game, while others are not. Second, those who oppose video games because they deal with mature, crass or confronting material may be considered to have a moral “double standard” as similar content and themes are regularly presented in film, television and publication formats. Therefore, the argument for opposing adult video games on the basis of value ethics lacks the capacity to deliver a useful, objective critique. A moral counter-argument may also be advanced that censoring video games with mature content deprives Australian citizens of their right to make their own choice, regardless of whether that choice should be considered “good” or “bad”.

2. Violent video games and antisocial or aggressive behaviours among youth

Arguably the strongest objection to adult video games that has emerged in recent years is that such games are harmful to child and adolescent users. Although adult video games are intended to be used by adults, it is not unlikely that a considerable number of young people will access and play these video games. Many have

expressed concern that, among young users, involvement in adult video games, particularly violent video games, leads to an increase in antisocial behaviour and aggressive tendencies (Anderson & Dill 2000; Gentile et al. 2003).

A review by Gentile and Stone (2005) argued that the link between violent video games and aggression is supported by a large body of research evidence, including over 250 correlational and experimental studies conducted in the past 20 years. These studies report that violent video game play is related to aggressive affect, cognitions and behaviour. However, while many of these studies report convergent findings, the research base is fraught with various methodological limitations that draw into question the validity of the link between violent video games and aggression. For example, some studies that claim to measure aggressive behaviour use dependent variables that are not clinically validated measures of aggressive behaviour, such as blasting a person with sound, or hitting an object (not a person). These measures are arguably inadequate given “aggressive” behaviour refers to the intentional act of harming a person.

Another problem is many studies do not adequately match violent and nonviolent games on potentially confounding dimensions such as frustration, difficulty or excitement. This means that any observed “aggression” effect may be caused, for example, by the frustration of losing a game, or by the emotional responses related to performing well in a video game. Another issue is that some studies fail to differentiate between “selection” and “exposure” effects. Although some studies have shown that young people who watch more violent media are more likely to report aggressive behaviour or that they have more fights, this does not mean that the video game playing is the source of the aggressive behaviour (an exposure effect). Instead, young people who are generally more aggressive may prefer activities that are consistent with their interests (selection effect). It is possible that any purported link between video games and aggressive behaviour is due to common antecedent factors, including poorer social functioning, disengagement with peers or school, or differences in personality and temperament.

Many studies are limited by small sample sizes of insufficient statistical power to detect an effect, if one does in fact exist. A meta-review by Ferguson (2007) has also argued that there is a publication bias in the video game violence effects literature, with inconclusive results often being ignored in favour of those studies that “confirm” a link. Given these limitations, many researchers have argued that the purported link between violent video games and aggression should be considered with caution (Durkin & Barber 2002; Griffiths 1999).

Another limitation of the video game aggression research is that it has failed to demonstrate any long-term negative social effects of playing violent video games, such as increased levels of youth crime or violence. In 2007, an investigation was undertaken by Khan (2007) for the US Council on Science and Public Health in order to ascertain the public health risk of video games. The report concluded:

In spite of the research on the relationship of video game exposure and aggressive behavior, there is little evidence of a substantial link between exposure to violent interactive video games and serious violence or crime. However, the preponderance of research from both sides of the debate does support, without controversy, the conclusion that exposure to violent media increases aggressive cognition, affect, and behavior, and decreases prosocial behavior in the short term. There also appears to be agreement that definitive long-term studies are lacking. (p.4)

Khan (2007) noted that the link between exposure to violent video games and negative behavioural outcomes also diminished as a function of age. In fact, the empirical link between playing violent video games and aggression was not compelling among individuals over the age of 10 years (Griffiths, 1999). On this basis, the research literature does not support the argument that adult video games should be prevented from sale due to the psychosocial and/or behavioural effects of such games on most players, including youth.

Despite the lack of conclusive research evidence, the *OFLC Classification Guidelines* (2008) state that, due to the interactive and reward-based nature of video games, those with adult content often carry a much higher

“impact” than film and literature. Impact refers to the potential harm of the material on the end user and the broader community. These conclusions would appear to ignore the fact that many films often depict very realistic characters, and realistic violence, and are often based on real-life characters. Nevertheless, despite these many caveats, Atkinson (2009) continues to cite the link between aggression and mature video games in his rejection of an R 18+ classification for video games. However, a substantial link has not been clearly established and is unlikely to be established using current methods.

3. Protecting the community from individuals who may react violently to adult video games

It has been suggested that some individuals within the clinically disordered population may react violently after exposure to adult video games, and, for this reason, these video games should be removed completely from the media environment (Atkinson 2009). The Columbine School shootings and the Virginia Tech massacre are often referred to as examples where violent video games led psychologically vulnerable young people to commit extremely violent acts. However, the primary flaw in this argument is that hundreds of thousands of other young people play the same violent video games without ever committing a violent crime. Police investigation of youth involved in school shootings tends to identify other factors, such as a history of verbal and physical abuse, a pattern of aggressive behaviour, severe psychological distress, low self-esteem, lack of empathy for others, lack of social integration, and precipitating stressful or traumatic events as more salient than the media habits of the youth. The argument that video games act as a trigger of extreme violent acts is not supported by current forensic understanding of the triggers for psychosis. Further, there is no clinical evidence to suggest that adult video games pose a clinically relevant risk in terms of triggering psychotic episodes in any population.

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association 1994) states that, among vulnerable persons, a psychotic episode can be brought on by the stress of major life-changing events (e.g. death of a close friend or family member, natural disaster

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or traumatic event) or by factors such as drug use or withdrawal from substances. Using or withdrawing from drugs such as cannabis, LSD, cocaine, amphetamines, ecstasy and alcohol can all potentially trigger a psychotic episode. It is important to note that the use of substances is only one possible factor contributing to an increased risk of psychosis in vulnerable individuals. Psychosis can also occur as a result of an organic medical condition, such as neurological conditions (e.g. epilepsy, migraines, dementia), metabolic imbalances (hypoglycaemia), endocrine disorders (hyperthyroidism and hypothyroidism), renal disease, electrolyte imbalance, and autoimmune disorders. Sometimes high doses of certain prescription medicines can also trigger a psychotic episode, e.g. steroids and amphetamines or anti-asthmatic medication. Taken together, there is no scientific evidence that playing video games of any kind will place a vulnerable person at greater risk of having a psychotic episode.

4. Counteractive input from some segments of the video game playing community

The R 18+ rating debate often provokes strong reactions from the video game playing community, who are probably the most vocal advocates for the revision of the classification system. While there have been numerous well-reasoned and rational arguments made by members of the gaming community (e.g. Doe 2009; Hill 2007), a minority have responded in an abusive and counteractive manner.

Offensive comments posted in response to articles published online serve to illustrate the hostile and counteractive responses of some members of the gaming community. Further, Michael Atkinson, the South Australian Attorney-General, claims that he has received many offensive letters, including death threats, from some video game players because of his stance on the R 18+ rating issue (Atkinson 2009). It is likely that negative and hostile reactions of this kind serve to distract from the reasoned arguments in the debate, and erode the general public's interest in the issue of the R 18+ rating. Therefore, while the views of a vocal minority should not be considered as representative of the views of the broader video game community, such negative input may act as a barrier to

establishing an effective dialogue between both sides of the R 18+ rating debate. This is not so much of an argument against the introduction of the R 18+ rating, but an unfortunate obstacle in the path to reasoned discussion of the issue.

Conclusion

The R 18+ rating debate encompasses a variety of socially relevant issues, including censorship, consumer freedom and social responsibility, among many other topics of discussion. Those in favour of the introduction of the R 18+ rating for video games have advanced a number of arguments based on the legal freedoms of the adult demographic in Australia, and the public demand for an R 18+ classification. Fundamentally, it is argued that the R 18+ classification would offer better protection of children and adolescents from highly explicit material that is currently being incorrectly classified as MA 15+ in Australia. Additionally, it is argued that an R 18+ rating would make the classification systems for video games, film and literature more consistent. An R 18+ rating for video games would provide adults who engage with adult content in film and literature with the freedom to engage with the same type of content within a video game. There are also economic benefits, such as reducing domestic piracy, and creative benefits, such as preserving creative expression in the industry. Critical analysis reveals that there is substantial scientific and/or marketing research evidence to support the basis of these supporting arguments. By comparison, those who argue against the introduction of the R 18+ rating have tended to rely on subjective moral arguments that may be subject to various degrees of scrutiny. There have also been various arguments put forward that refer to the effects that mature video games may have on the psychological wellbeing of children, adolescents and other vulnerable persons. To a degree, these arguments may reflect personal opinions and biases towards video games, as the available scientific literature raises some serious concerns about their validity, particularly with respect to the link between violent video games and aggression and the view that video games may trigger violent psychotic episodes. On balance, therefore, it may be concluded that

the known benefits outweigh the perceived but empirically insubstantial risks of introducing an R 18+ rating for video games in Australia. This brief but comprehensive analysis argues that the introduction of an R 18+ classification would address a number of concerns made by those who tend to oppose adult video games.

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Legislative instrument

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AUTHORS

Daniel King is a postdoctoral research fellow in the School of Psychology at the University of Adelaide. His research considers the psychosocial impact of gaming and gambling technologies on young people.

Paul Delfabbro is an associate professor in the School of Psychology at the University of Adelaide. He is author of over 120 reports and articles, and more than 120 conference presentations and other publications in the areas of applied social research relating to foster care, gambling and other areas of social policy.