

SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO THE CLASSIFICATION OF ONLINE GAMES 2011

I respectfully submit the following:

responses to the Attorney General's inquiry into this matter are revealing. The vast majority of respondents were young male gamers who 'ticked the boxes' on an online questionnaire. Naturally they were nearly all in favour of allowing a new classification for online games that would legalize violent content. This is significant because the opinion of the gamers group contrasts with that of the 'elders' group represented by church and civil authorities, and women's organizations. The former has grown up with the belief that technology can solve most of our problems—hence its affinity with the online survey format—while the latter has learned that technology causes as many problems as it solves.

It is a truism that the smarter we become about regulating internet content, the smarter our targets become about evading us. Assurances that introducing an R18+ category for online games would allow Australia to join an international network of regulators, and hence improve our ability to filter out undesirable games, could be subject to a 'use-by date'. Nevertheless we continue to try because as a civilized society we have a responsibility to protect the vulnerable. The Family Voice report points out 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". But we may safely assume that a significant number of those who become addicted to violent video games in their teens are likely to remain addicted in adulthood. It is well-established that addictions of every kind are more likely to be found in those who suffer psychosis, and that when adolescents develop addictions they are more likely to become psychotic. And as no-one could reasonably doubt that violent computer games are addictive, they are most likely linked to severe behaviour disturbances, not only for adolescents, but for adults who have a predisposition to violence. These adults would not be protected by an R18+ classification. And the success rate for remediating addiction gives no ground for confidence that the problem can be contained thereby.

There is also the question of violence against women which is already a feature of some popular R18+ games overseas. While it is to be hoped that content which is demeaning to women will be classed as RC for now, there are no assurances that the games lobby will desist from pressuring politicians to abandon the RC classification altogether. Anyone who is aware of the power of media lobbyists in Canberra would wish to preserve the distinction between R18+ and RC categories by all possible means. And yet we know from the way film classifications have changed over the years that R18+ will inevitably contain borderline material. Thus the new classification will only protect vulnerable citizens if a much more rigorous approach is applied than in the case of TV shows and films. But if this is not a certainty there is a compelling argument against legalizing violent computer games. If there is always a significant number of individuals who should never have access to them, but can easily obtain them legally or otherwise, changes to the law may give parents and regulators a false sense of security.

Louise McManus