

Office of Film and Literature Classification
Guidelines Review 2001
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Dear OFLC,

I have been an adult computer games player for about seven years. During that time, I have played and researched a wide variety of computer games - mainstream and obscure, controversial and otherwise. I have talked to and/or corresponded with hundreds of fellow games players worldwide. Additionally, I have prepared Web sites, Government inquiry submissions, and even a university thesis on computer games censorship issues in Australia.

My position has always been that the current computer games classification guidelines are in considerable need of reform owing to their significant deficiencies in that they are out of touch with the realities of computer games and their players. There are ways in which less censorship of these games can be instituted and managed for the good order of society while at the same time ensuring that the civil liberties of adult Australians do not continue to be infringed.

With this background, I hereby present my comments on relevant issues you mention in your discussion paper:

1.1 Should interactive products, such as DVDs, computer games and online content, be classified in the same way as films and videotapes?

Yes for DVDs and computer games.

(Assuming the current film classification guidelines remain unchanged)

Reasons:

- * Computer games, like movies, are widely enjoyed by both children and adults, and thus require the ratings system for films which allows for adult material.
- * Embarrassing inconsistencies such as the interactive DVD movie "Tender Loving Care" receiving an MA 15+ film rating, but exactly the same movie with exactly the same content and interactivity marketed as a cd-rom computer game being refused classification, will be prevented.
- * DVDs are a new and widely accepted stage in the evolution of home entertainment and should be embraced rather than harshly and unfairly reacted against as were computer games in the early to mid 1990s.

But,

No for online content.

Reasons:

- * The vast majority of online content is simply text and static pictures. It bears no resemblance to film whatsoever. Thus, it is more justified to rate most online content as per the publications ratings guidelines and deal with the comparatively minimal interactive content under the film ratings guidelines.
- * Online content may be modified or deleted at any time with no notice. It is mostly futile to try to classify this type of content as any form of traditional media.
- * Most online content is created and hosted overseas where Australian laws do not apply.

1.2 Should the current system for classifying computer games be retained?

No.

Reasons:

* It is based on assumptions that have recently been thoroughly and accurately discredited by Australian Government and other knowledgeable researchers. Such assumptions include: adults do not play computer games; computer games play leads to violence in the real world; adults do not have the technical expertise to adequately supervise their children's computer games play; and that computer games are a low form of artistic expression, promoting nothing more than mindless violence and degrading pornography.

* If computer games are to be classified the same way as films, they should be subject to exactly the same spectrum of ratings, i.e.: G, PG, M, MA, R, X, and RC. The G 8+ rating that currently applies only to computer games should be scrapped. These measures would pave the way to true classification consistency between the two media.

* No comparable Western country has such a strict computer games classification system. In the USA and the UK, for example, computer games with adult classifications have been permitted for sale since the mid 1990s. Such games include many titles, some very popular, that have been banned to everyone in Australia - adults and children alike.

2.3 Should there be an 'R' classification for computer games?

Yes.

Reasons:

* Adults comprise at least half of all computer games players and deserve to be able to play games aimed directly at their age group, just as they currently enjoy age-appropriate films. These games often have mature, sophisticated storylines and are far from the "trash" their detractors make them out to be. Pornography will not be permitted as it is not allowed under the R rating.

* It is apparent from the OFLC's own draft combined films and computer games ratings guidelines that any imminent R rating for games will be stricter than the same rating when applied to films. This makes the prospect of R rated computer games perhaps similar to MA rated films which even pro-censorship groups in Australian society agree that children may currently watch under adult supervision.

* Children can be protected from this material by: the fact that adults do have the technical expertise to stop this material from falling into their children's hands; retailers ensuring that identification at point of sale is requested and provided where a purchaser's adulthood is open to question; realising that R rated movies and videos have been legally available for decades with no real problems for children; and understanding that R rated computer games are ultimately just fiction and entertainment, being nowhere near as potentially problematic as illegal drugs and weapons should they still somehow manage to fall into the hands of some children.

5. Are there other issues related to the effective operation of the guidelines which should be considered in the review?

Yes.

Reasons:

* Classification guidelines exist to serve the needs of the entire Australian public. As such, all sections of the public should have their opinions actively sought whenever any of the guidelines are under review. This includes taking whatever steps are necessary to ensure those groups and individuals with anti-censorship or at least "less censorship" ideological positions are given an equal chance to air their opinions compared to individuals and groups which hold opposite views.

* Such reviews should be conducted with greater frequency than is currently practised. Technology changes too rapidly in today's world to allow for delays of five years or more between guideline reviews.

* These guidelines should always be applied with the full context of the contentious scenes in any computer game or film in mind. Such scenes should never be viewed in isolation but within the overall context of plot, character, emotional impact, artistic merit, and the likely audience for the game or film in mind. To properly understand such considerations, the Classification Board should ensure that its members are always closely representative of the community in terms of: age, sex, race, and knowledge of the computer games and film industries.

Thank you very much for your consideration of my submission.

Yours faithfully,

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