



DEC 6: AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL ON CHILDREN AND THE MEDIA- OPPOSITION TO FEDERAL GOVERNMENT SUPPORT FOR R18+

On December 5, the Federal Minister for Home Affairs, Brendan O'Connor, stated that the Federal Govt will support the introduction of an R18+ classification for computer games, at the December 10 meeting of SCAG. (Min. H A&J Media release 5 December 2010).

The Minister claims this will help protect our kids. **It will not.**

The arguments he gives for his support of an R18+ can be summarised thus:

- 1) **It will provide better guidance for parents**
- 2) **It will remove unsuitable material from children and teenagers: children and teenagers should not be exposed to the gratuitous sex, violence and adult themes in some computer games**
- 3) **Some games classified MA15+ now are classified for adults only overseas**
- 4) **If R18+ is introduced it *could* [our italics] result in games now MA15+ being reclassified**
- 5) **The arguments for an R18+ have been backed up by research recently released (an AG's Department Literature Review; a telephone poll) plus submissions to the late 2009 Govt Inquiry).**

The ACCM argues that these are unsubstantiated claims that are misleading. Our commentary follows:

1) **Labelling games R18+ provides better guidance for parents:**

An R18+ classification is a strong signal of material unsuitable for minors. But, the benefit of this will be marginal compared to the challenges faced by parents in preventing their children's access to inappropriate material be it MA15+ or R18+. The Minister seems to be saying that parents don't have enough knowledge about the classification system to recognise MA15+ which also has legal force. The answer to that is better consumer education, not using the sledgehammer of R18+ to get the message across.

2) **It will remove unsuitable games from children and teenagers:**

Children's current access to unsuitable material results from a combination of a lack of public education about the legally restricted nature of MA15+, and the criteria that allow strong violence at the M and MA15+ levels. Adding R18+ into the mix is not the answer to this. The answer is to review all the classification criteria.

3) **Some games now MA15+ here are classified for adults overseas.**

There has been no reliable research done on whether this is due to the absence of R18+ in Australia, or due to cultural and classification criteria differences between countries. Criteria allowing strong violence justified by context at MA15+, and higher impact if stylised are not replicated in all countries. Once again, if the MA15+ criteria give adolescents access to inappropriate material, the answer is to review our criteria, not add another higher level of violence via R18+.

4) **If R18+ is available, some games now MA15+ "could" be reclassified**

This will be true only if the criteria for MA15+ are revised to be more restrictive. Games now MA15+ are there because they meet the present MA15+ criteria, and new games that meet

those same criteria will be MA15+. The reclassification of games is not an automatic consequence of legalising R18+ games, and there is no current proposal for how this could be achieved.

5) The arguments for R18+ have been backed up by recent research, and findings of 2009 Inquiry

The Minister quotes large percentages who support an R18+ for games. He places great reliance on the results of two recent surveys- a Literature Review carried out by officers of his department and a phone survey. Psychologists who work in this field have commented “The Literature Review prepared by the Minister’s Department chose to downplay the results of research showing harmful effects of violent media, while emphasising the claim that there is widespread confusion about the interpretation of the vast literature on media violence. This is in strong contrast to the recent statement on video game violence presented to the US Supreme Court, prepared by 13 internationally recognised and reputable international scholars and supported by close to 100 researchers in countries from Spain to Australia.”

The telephone survey relied on by the Minister actually found the majority of respondents agreed it would be difficult for parents to stop children playing R18+ games; that these should be classified differently because you play, not watch; and that playing violent games results in real life violence. The context of the other survey questions about whether there should be an R18+ appears conducive to respondents supporting its introduction because they have been misled into thinking that introducing R18+ was going to move very violent games out of MA15+.

The outcome of the 2009 Inquiry into whether there should be an R18+ classification was certainly skewed by the weight of very brief responses in the affirmative from the gaming lobby. However, detailed submissions to the Inquiry were almost 50-50 for and against the proposal, with gamers and industry on one side, and the rest of the community predominantly on the other.

CONCLUSION

The proposal for R18+ has been advanced principally by arguing that it would provide greater protection for children. This argument does not stand up.

A more honest argument would be based on the principle of adult freedom to see hear and read what they want. Gamers want access to more extreme content.

These principles are both part of the Classification Code, which strives to maintain a balance between them. Adding R18+ will not improve the balance.

The State and Territory Ministers meeting to discuss these issues on Friday need to consider carefully whether it is really possible to advance the protection of children, while advancing an adult civil liberties agenda.

The Australian Council on Children and the Media is a national not for profit community organisation whose mission is to support families, industry and decision makers in building and maintaining a media environment that fosters the health, safety and wellbeing of Australian children.

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