

## Why R18+ won't protect kids.

### Professor Elizabeth Handsley

The recent flurry of controversy over the question of evidence that computer games contribute to heightened aggression, and the comparison of the strength of that effect to the links between smoking and lung cancer, has been a convenient diversion from the main issue in the debate.

Pretty much everybody agrees that games of the level of violence that would be allowed in a legal R18+ category would be unsuitable and potentially harmful for children. The question is whether the protection of children is better served by the current system or by a liberalisation of the classification system.

The argument that liberalisation would enhance protection of children is breathtaking in its disingenuity. It relies on the proposition that some games are currently misclassified at MA15+ (debatable) and that this would be rectified by the legalisation of R18+ games (doubtful, at least in the short term). What it overlooks is the fact that there is other material, of even higher impact, that is currently being kept out of the market but would be legally available if the gamers had their way.

That's right, we have to let *more* and *stronger* violence into the market, in order to provide children with the necessary protection from inappropriately violent material.

The alleged misclassification of games in Australia is debatable because it is supported by the observation that certain games that are rated MA15+ here are rated R (or similar) overseas. The conclusion drawn is that these games would and should be rated R18+ here, if such a classification existed. The flaw in this argument is the assumption that the criteria for classification are the same in all countries – that R18+ in Australia means the same thing as R everywhere else. This assumption cannot be sustained.

Nor is there any reason to believe that classifiers would somehow change their views on the material they currently rate MA15+, just because R18+ were legalised. If they are currently saying that material is suitable for minors, how could the legalisation make it unsuitable?

It is simply impossible to argue, with intellectual honesty, that the legalisation of R18+ games would mean better protection of children, unless one believes that legal R18+ material would not find its way into the hands of children. Such a belief is fanciful. Nor do I think that anybody seriously holds it.

The people putting the legalise-to-protect-children argument do not identify themselves as having any kind of history of putting children's interests first. Nor, as far as I am aware, have they ever sought to support or align themselves with such people and groups. Gaming interests have not been motivated to do the research and lobbying that they have done, simply by a desire to protect children. Their primary interest is in having access to more and stronger violence in computer games.

It would be preferable if the gaming lobby were open about their real wishes, because in my view these wishes are perfectly respectable: they want greater

freedom for adults to see, hear and use whatever material they want. This freedom is recognised by the current classification scheme, and rightly so, in a liberal democracy. Why, then, does the gaming lobby not rely on this argument to support their demands?

I believe it is because they know that in this particular case the freedom cannot ever sensibly outweigh the need of children for protection, equally recognised in the classification scheme. Despite gamers' claims to the contrary, the only thing of significance that has changed since the original decision to disallow R18+ games is that we have all gotten older. Children are still children, violence is still violence, and parents still need the support that the ban on ultra-violent games affords. What they need is a more effective ban, not a relaxation of the current ban. If greater effectiveness cannot be achieved, the status quo is better than the alternative. At least the higher-end material is still excluded.

I note further that recently one has heard little of the argument that the majority of gamers are adults. This is not surprising, because it, too, is a very weak and disingenuous argument. It basically asserts that the position of children as a minority in the gaming community disentitles them to protection. Such an argument is at odds with the structure of the classification system, and the more general acceptance in human rights thinking that sometimes the interests of the many must be sacrificed for the protection of the vulnerable few.

If ever there were a case for applying that framework, it is this. The (alleged) interests of the many in playing ultra-violent games can surely never be said to outweigh the need to protect children from ultra-violent material.