



Growing up fast and furious:

Conference report

This important and timely conference was presented by ACCM and the *Children and Families Research Centre*, Macquarie University on Friday 19 March 2010 at the NSW Teachers Federation Conference Centre in Surrey Hills, NSW. It was very positively received by those who attended.

The conference featured three of the most highly respected international researchers reviewing the evidence on media violence:

- Professor. L. Rowell Huesmann (long term impacts of violent media)
- Professor Ed Donnerstein (Internet violence and cyber-bullying)
- Distinguished Research Professor Craig Anderson (violent video games)

They were joined by four Australians:

- Professor Louise Newman (sexualisation of children)
- Dr Wayne Warburton (violent music videos)
- Dr Cordelia Fine (children's understanding of advertising)
- Professor Elizabeth Handsley (the role of regulation and classification).

A wide cross-section of children's professionals, community groups, industry representatives, parliamentarians, academics and regulators were there to hear these speakers. The 180 attendees came from all states of Australia, New Zealand and South Africa.

The conference was opened by Minister for Home Affairs, Brendan O'Connor who made reference in his speech to the current R18+ for games debate. In his view, the burden of proof for change to legalising R18+ games rests on those who want the change.

The conference was chaired by Professor Alan Hayes, Director of the Australian Institute for Family Studies in

the morning and by Richard Aedy, presenter of ABC Radio National Life Matters, in the afternoon. Professor Hayes also delivered the closing summary.

Some papers and presentations have been made available in PDF format and can be found on the ACCM website. Others will be put up as they are received. Abstracts of all presentations are also available.

http://www.youngmedia.org.au/media-children/01_17_sydney_conference.htm



From left: Dr Wayne Warburton, Professor Elizabeth Handsley, the Hon. Brendan O'Connor, Minister for Home Affairs, Professor Ed Donnerstein, Professor L. Rowell Huesmann, Professor Craig Anderson and Barbara Biggins, CEO of ACCM. pictured at the Sydney conference.

WA MPs and MLCs oppose R18+

Thirteen members of the of the WA Parliament (mostly Liberals, but including Labor and National members) have written to the WA Attorney General opposing the legalisation of R18+ computer games. They also made a submission to the recent Classification inquiry on this matter. Their submission is reproduced here with permission of Michael Sutherland MLA, one of the coordinators of the submission.

Introductory Remarks.

The civility of our society is adversely affected when violence and explicit sexual content pervade our communications media and entertainment industry. Violence and explicit sexual content in computer and video games raise particular concerns due to the interactive nature of these games. The proposal to introduce an R18+ classification for computer games has already been rejected repeatedly by the Standing Committee of Censorship Ministers because of these concerns. We are dismayed to find that the Commonwealth Attorney-General is unilaterally pursuing this proposal by issuing a consultation paper. As legislators responsible for the peace, order and good government of the

.....continued on P2

Bratz, Britney and Bralettes: The sexualisation of childhood

7:30 pm to 9.45pm, Thursday 13 May 2010
Helen Reid Hall, Walford Anglican School for Girls Inc
316 Unley Road, Hyde Park, SA 5061

From tiny tots to late teens, girls are being preyed on, and damaged, by sexualisation and media messages about weight, looks, clothes and behaviour. The messages they are getting are wrong. The harm is real, and not just to girls.

Come and hear some of Australia's best speakers on this issue.

- Michael Carr-Gregg, well known author and psychologist
- Julie Gale, founding Director of Kids Free 2B Kids
- Rita Princi, child psychologist
- Professor Elizabeth Handsley, Law, Flinders University
- Anglican Archbishop Dr. Jeffrey Driver

Tickets \$27.50

http://www.youngmedia.org.au/mediachildren/03_15_seminars.htm



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EDITORIAL

Why legalising R18+ games will not protect children

There are many in the community who mistakenly believe that the introduction of an R18+ classification for computer games will provide greater protection for children.

It will not. This is because

- Legalising R18+ level games will add into the retail system, games with more extreme levels of violence, and higher level sexual and drug taking activity than presently available in the retail system
- Games which are currently deemed to meet the MA15+ criteria will remain in that category

From our reading of the many views expressed in support of legalising R18+ level games, it is evident that many support this supposed "protection" because

- they think that many games in the MA15+ category contain too high a level of violence.
- they believe that if an R18+ category is introduced, these games will somehow be moved across into this R18+ category
- they believe that the current system is inconsistent and confusing
- they believe that an R18+ classification is more recognisable to parents as containing material that is unsuitable for their children and adolescents

These reasons are not valid because:

- The games that are now in the MA15+

category are there because they have been judged to meet the MA15+ criteria. There is no proposal to change these criteria



Barbara Biggins
OAM
Hon CEO

- No change is likely to the classification of any game now classified MA15+, unless there were an application for review. This is an expensive process, and given the time lapse could probably be undertaken only by an Attorney-General
- Because there is no proposal that the criteria for MA15+ will be reviewed, future material of the same level of impact will continue to be classified at that level
- The introduction of another level of legal classification would not make the system any more consistent, or less confusing. If anything it would only complicate matters further
- There is no proof that people understand R18+ any better than MA15+. But, if MA15+ is not well understood, then a community education campaign could help parents and others understand its meaning - that material classified MA15+ is unsuitable for those under 15yrs.

In brief, the only impact that the legalisation of R18+ games would have is to introduce more violence, and stronger violence, into the Australian market. It would not help parents and it would not solve any existing problems, real or imagined, with the current system.

Continued from P1

people of Western Australia we are conscious of the impact that the ready availability of R18+ computer games could have on Western Australians, including children and adolescents. We urge all ministers responsible for censorship matters – Commonwealth, State and Territory – to abandon any further consideration of the proposal for an R18+ classification for computer games and to re-affirm the wisdom of the national classification scheme in limiting computer games to no higher than the MA15+ classification.

Impact Of Violence.

We note that the Guidelines for the Classification of Films and Computer Games allow for violence in the MA15+ classification that is considered to have an impact "no higher than strong". The R18+ classification allows for violence which is considered to have a "high impact".

Research evidence appears to support the view that exposure to violence in computer or video games has both immediate and long-lasting effects on aggressive behaviour, aggressive cognition, and aggressive affect. (Allowing computer games that would warrant a classification of R18+ because they contain violence that is considered to be of "high impact" would therefore seem likely to contribute to an increase in violence in our community. Indeed leading researchers in this field have reported

recently 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*".

Engaging In Violence

Researchers have also identified reasons for considering that the violent content in computer games is likely to have more profound effects on players than the violent content in films and television programs has on viewers:

- in computer games the player often identifies with the aggressor;
- the player actively rehearses the whole sequence of aggression; and
- the proportion of the game devoted to violence is higher than for most films.

This research lends support to the commonsense approach adopted by the national classification scheme of limiting the highest classification for computer games to MA15+ while allowing an R18+ classification for films.

Recommendation

The proposal to give further consideration to the introduction of an R18+ classification for computer games should be abandoned and the wisdom of the national classification scheme in limiting computer games to no higher than the MA15+ classification be re-affirmed.

Baby boutiques stay in fashion

Mothers may cut back on spending but not for their children

JESSICA DODD
RETAIL

HELEN Hamilton has no hesitation about splurging on a dress for 10-month-old daughter Isla.

While often forgoing buying something for herself, she thinks nothing of popping into an up-market childrenswear shop or David Jones to buy a pair of leggings or top for her only daughter.

"I usually buy my daughter's basics from Kmart, Target or Cotton-On-Kids because children grow out of their clothes so quickly," Hamilton, a student nurse, says. "But I do enjoy shopping at children boutique brands or David Jones for something special."

Lawyer and mother of two Libat Karsh loves shopping at Pumpkin Patch, an upmarket childrenswear store.

"The dresses are made in light cotton and have such happy colours," she says. "I do tend to buy at another boutique store called Seed but I think buying baby

clothes from designer labels such as Gucci is too extravagant."

Their attitudes to buying children's clothes at upmarket boutiques comes as no surprise to Sam Ellis, a senior industry analyst at independent research house Ibisworld, who says that as more women delay having children until their early 30s, many are cashed up and more willing to spend on their kids.

"We are seeing an emergence of older mothers who prefer to shop at high-end brands such as Ralph Lauren, Dior Baby, Diesel and Baby Gucci," Ellis says.

"Many mums believe that if their children dress well, they are an extension of themselves and reflect a certain status.

"Most mums would tend to cut back on their personal spending but will continue to splurge on their pride and joy."

He says sales of childrenswear rose by 3 per cent to \$2.3 billion for 2009-10 and are expected to grow by an average of 3.3 per cent a year over the next five years.

In the overall clothing market, sales grew by less than 1 per cent to \$11.9bn for the same period compared with 2008-09.

"Childrenswear tends to be recession-proof," Ellis says.

Childrenswear tends to be recession-proof

SAM ELLIS
IBISWORLD ANALYST

"During the economic downturn, most households cut back on their personal spend on clothes but continued to buy new clothing for their growing kids."

New Zealand-listed children's clothing chain Pumpkin Patch saw earnings before interest and tax improve by 2 per cent to \$NZ19.9 million (\$15.1m) for its 114 stores in Australia.

The company plans to open 30 to 40 new stores in Australia over the next three years.

The company's general manager for Australia, Trish Watt, says Pumpkin Patch is well known for its quality and pricing.

"We are just a tiny fraction more expensive than the bigger chains... but we pride ourselves on quality designs offering top value, and our clothes do not wear out — they last," Watt says.

Myer says childrenswear was a better performing category in the first half, with sales driven by exclusive brands such as Jack &

Milly and Sprout, which are available only in its department stores.

At the value-for-money end of the market, Target's children's clothing remains popular whatever the economic climate.

"What we find is that our range caters for people of all demographics and incomes," a Target spokeswoman says.

"During the height of the global financial crisis, we saw a shift to volumes in the lower price points. In the first half of this financial year childrenswear and child-related products such as car seats and prams sold well for Target against strong competition."

Facing increasing competition, Pumpkin Patch has adopted an all-year promotion strategy, with some clothes on offer selling at discounted prices.

Watt says mothers tend to shop around, checking out prices before buying.

"So we have to be competitive and offer promotions all year round," she says.

She is well aware that her chain store will have to closely watch other rival brands such as Esprit Kids, Fred Bare and Osh Kosh, which are available in department stores or stand-alone shops.

The Australian, 15 March 2010

Child's play goes green

Anne Fullerton meets the duo behind a pint-sized gardener.

Moving from Melbourne to a property 50 kilometres out of Grafton isn't an obvious path to television success but Cate McQuillen and Hewey Eustace reckon relocating to a small weatherboard church in the middle of a paddock was one of the best decisions they've made.

"Creatively it gave us the space and the opportunity to explore what we wanted to do," McQuillen says. The result is *dirtygirlworld*, an animated program that tries to make children aged four to seven more environmentally aware.

"We wanted to take an opportunity to tell a story about sustainable living that was fun and relevant and that kids would really enjoy, rather than some sort of preachy tale," she says.

Each 11-minute episode weaves trivia about the environment, ideas for growing your own vegies and lessons about nature into the adventures of Dirtygirl and her friends. Also inhabiting this world of computer-generated animation and photomontage are recycling enthusiast Scrapboy, Grubby the temperamental worm and Ken the daredevil weevil.

The show has a music video aesthetic. In fact, Hackett Films, which collaborated on the animation, made the Dissociatives' award-winning clip and each episode of *dirtygirlworld* has its own score, written by Eustace and sung by McQuillen.

"The idea of writing a song that parents can tolerate possibly helps make a good kids' song," says Eustace, who used to tour with



Creative... Dirtygirl gets children's attention.

folk-rock musician Jeff Lang. McQuillen says writing for children provides plenty of creative licence: "I think we've got a massive freedom to say some things and go some places musically that you just don't have with adults, because of the 'cool' factor of music in the adult world. We could never have used the word 'mollusc' in an adult song, it just wouldn't have happened."

How *dirtygirlworld* evolved from an album

of children's songs sold to friends and locals to a 52-episode series playing on the ABC in Australia, CBeebies for BBC in Britain and CBC in Canada is a tale in itself.

After winning a series of local pitching competitions, they went on to win KidScreen Summit in New York, where their "high energy, bizarre pitching" got them noticed.

"We hula hooped, we had a massive video going, we wore Madonna headsets, we danced and knew our pitch off by heart. Looking back on it now, and having now spent a lot of time pitching and helping people pitch, we were quite insane. We did not know the rules of the game. Everyone else was doing a PowerPoint presentation and we're doing a gig."

The irony of using a television show to encourage kids to engage with the natural world isn't lost on the pair but it seems their message is being heard. "The best fun for us is the emails that come in the morning to tell us about what the kids are growing or how their allotment's going in the UK," McQuillen says.

Dirtygirlworld airs at 1.30pm on ABC2 and 8.00am on ABC1 each day.

Sydney Morning Herald Guide, 15-21 March 2010

It's not child's play

ADULTS and teenagers might get a kick out of Tim Burton's dark and twisted take on *Alice in Wonderland*, but experts warn it is the latest in a long line of inappropriate movies targeting children.

The classification board has rated the film PG while warning of "scary scenes and fantasy violence" and suggesting it contains material children could find "confusing and upsetting".

The Australian Council on Children and the Media (ACCM) warns the film is "darker than the original stories" and its violence and frightening scenes mean children aged less than 12 should not be allowed to watch it, while 12 to 15-year-olds should be supervised.

This latest adaptation of Lewis Carroll's work is not the first time a beloved children's book has been transformed into a film more suited to mature audiences.

Media analyst and academic Lee Burton cites *Where the Wild Things Are*, *Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events* and the *Harry Potter* series as prime offenders.

"There have been a whole host of these things coming along now and it does worry me and it does worry other experts in child development and the media," she says.

"The big movie producers figure there won't be a large enough audience with just kids and families and so they want to appeal to adults and teenagers as well. Some of the really good books for children have been made into movies that are just too scary."

Ms Burton says *Alice in Wonderland* is aimed squarely at adults. "The Mad Hatter and the Queen are going to be absolutely terrifying for young kids," she says. "Anybody under about eight is going to be very, very scared."

Ms Burton's research with young children found many report being very frightened by characters with whom older viewers are comfortable. While she loves *Lemony Snicket*, children told her they were frightened by Jim Carrey's "evil, violent and destructive" character Count Olaf.

Vice-president of ACCM, Professor Elizabeth Handsley, says her organisation increasingly is concerned about

Children's classics are being turned into movies inappropriate for young viewers.

ANDREW FENTON reports.

children's classics being turned into mature films.

"It's a terrible shame that people keep making movies based on children's books without thinking of the effect they will have on young children," she says. "They ramp up the content to maximise the broadest possible audience and rely on parents assuming it's a kid's book and therefore appropriate for them to watch."

Professor Handsley also was concerned about Spike Jonze's recent version of the much-loved 1963 picture book *Where the Wild Things Are*. "You'd read the book to any child, but seeing the impact of these events on the big screen is a very different experience," she says.

Experts agree that children view - and are affected by - cinema in different ways to adults.

Children aged less than three, for example, do not make much distinction between reality and fiction and most children this age think a bowl of cereal shown on television will spill if the TV is turned upside down.

Children as old as nine often believe such characters as *Indiana Jones* and *Rambo* are real people. Children are not as familiar with the visual language of editing and the mechanics of plot and story development.

"The research I've done with children as young as four, and up to 15, is that they simply can't understand some parts, so the scary bits become scarier," Ms Burton says. "They don't realise that, in fact, our hero or heroine are going to come out of this fine, that things are going to be OK."

Critics point out there always have been dark and terrible tales in children's literature - just consider the Brothers Grimm fairytales featuring unusually cruel step-parents and witches being burnt alive in ovens. To a child, however, the experience of reading a story is very different to watching a film. A scary tale that can

be dipped in and out of over time and read in a well-lit room, is a substantially different proposition to a movie that unfolds in one continuous take in the dark, with immersive sound and vision.

Ms Burton says books are only really as scary as the child's imagination. "When you're reading you have to conjure up the image - and while kids' imaginations are vivid, they are, by lack of experience, very limited," she says. "The screen character is going to be bigger and scarier. In the *Harry Potter* books Lord Voldemort may be a scary character - but when you see the movies, well, he scares even me!"

Prof Handsley says a similar prob-

lem to inappropriate children's book adaptations, are the numerous M-rated franchises that target young children through merchandising and marketing campaigns.

Most comic book films fall into this category she says, including *Spiderman*, *The Hulk* and the latest *Batman* films, but there are other examples including the two most recent *Star Wars* prequels and *The Lord of the Rings* films.

"There is merchandise promoting *Spider-Man* and *The Dark Knight* like pyjamas and colouring books and ties with fast food outlets," she says. "These are all ways of making it look to parents as if it will be OK for children to watch, and it undermines the classification." Ms Burton says the present classification system needs an overhaul. "I think the censorship board needs to take another look at the ratings because the system has become too soft," she says.

The Advertiser, 4 March 2010

Teens turn on to Facebook

MYSFACE has lost its favoured status among Australian teenagers — the so-called digital natives among us — according to new data indicating three-quarters of all 14- to 17-year-olds who use social networking sites now prefer Facebook.

Facebook's dominance among all users of social networking sites grew last year, with four in five nominating it as their main site, according to Nielsen.

Online's 2010 Social Media Report. Time spent each month on Facebook increased to eight hours and 19 minutes in January.

There was also strong growth in the number of people who visit social networking sites on their mobiles, which doubled from 13 per cent at the end of 2008 to 26 per cent last December.

The Twitter audience grew by 400 per cent in 2009, making it the big growth story of the year, with one in three Australians now having visited the site.

But Nielsen Online research director Melanie Ingrey said the jury was out on whether it could sustain those levels. "Twitter was the big social media brand in 2009 in terms of its reach," she said. "What we haven't seen sustained is loyalty and repeat visitation. In the last quarter of

2009 we were really seeing some retention issues."

The Social Media Report, compiled each December from an online survey of 2000 Australians, also found there was a marked change last year in the social networking habits of teenagers, the majority of whom had until recently withstood the Facebook onslaught.

In 2008, 55 per cent named the music-focused website MySpace as their main social networking site, a figure which slipped to 11 per cent last year. Facebook's popularity among 14- to 17-year-olds rose from 29 per cent to 77 per cent over the same period.

MySpace Australia communications manager Darain Faraz said the site had evolved from a pure social networking model to be more content-focused. "Teens on MySpace — like the other 2.1 million Aussies using MySpace each month — have multiple online identities, and use different platforms for different functions," he said.

"Facebook and Twitter provide terrific distribution channels for our users to share the content they discover on MySpace."

LARA SINCLAIR

The Australian, 15 March 2010

Pioneer of Australian idiom for kids dies

ROSEMARY SOKENSEN

PATRICIA Wrightson, who died this week aged 88, was one of the first children's writers to use Australian places and idioms in her novels.

Born in the northern NSW town of Lismore, Wrightson's first books were published in the 1950s, and she continued writing until ill health forced her retirement in the late 1990s.

The Rocks of Honey (1960) and *The Nargun and the Stars* (1973) were two of her four books to be awarded the Children's

Book Council Book of the Year. She was also awarded the Hans Christian Andersen Medal.

In 1999, the NSW Premier's literary awards honoured Ms Wrightson by naming their children's literary prize after her. Minister for the Arts, Virginia Judge, yesterday acclaimed Ms Wrightson as an "Australian literary great".

"In particular she helped lend an Australian flavour to children's literature, which for much of our history had come directly from England," she said.

Married with two children she published 28 books.

The Australian, 25 March 2010

Junk food advertising

THE Greens will introduce a Bill into State Parliament to ban junk food and drink advertising in children's television programs.

Greens MLC Mark Parnell said Health Minister John Hill pledged two years ago to ban it if the industry did not regulate itself.

Mr Parnell said the ads remained and "fast food outlets flout the voluntary rules".

A spokeswoman for Mr Hill said South Australia led the nation on measures to address the advertising of junk food on television.

The Advertiser, 6 March 2010

Beyond the schoolyard, into the home

The Weekend Australian, 20-21 March 2010

Mobile phones and the internet ensure there is no escape from a determined bully

DINA HALKIC

I WOKE at 6.30am on February 5 last year, as I do every morning, to get ready for work. I walked past my son Allem's room and, to my horror, saw he wasn't there.

I ran downstairs to see if he'd woken earlier than me, which would have been out of character. He'd just begun year 12 after the long Christmas break and was finding it difficult waking up.

He wasn't anywhere in the house. Call it mother's intuition; I just knew in my heart something was not right.

I woke my husband and screamed that Allem had gone. We saw his mobile phone and started calling his friends. As my husband, Ali, was going through Allem's phone to see if he could find any clues to his whereabouts, he came across disturbing, threatening text messages.

The police eventually arrived. I could see in the policemen's eyes that the news wasn't good. They made us sit down and all I could hear were the words, "I'm so sorry." I just fainted.

Allem's body had been found at the foot of Melbourne's Westgate Bridge. Later we found a suicide note that read: "Dear Mum and Dad, I'm sorry it had to end this way. You're the best parents a kid could ask for."

I don't have any recollection of what occurred until later in the day when I came downstairs. I could see more than 100 people in and around our house.

Ali had shown the texts on our son's phone to the police. Officers were talking to Allem's close friends to piece together what had happened.

We went to his computer and

cont



NORM OORLOFF

an individual has been put to trial for cyber bullying.

The plea hearing is set for April 8. It has already been adjourned twice. It's clear he will be using every legal avenue to prolong this.

Parents to speak of their tragedy

DINA and Ali Halkic, parents of a 17-year-old who committed suicide in Melbourne last year after apparent sustained bullying, will appear with a studio audience to discuss the problem tomorrow night.

The Seven Network's Sunday Night current affairs show at 6.30pm is hosting a forum following up a story it recently aired that reported one in four Australian schoolchildren are bullied.

Mother Dina Halkic tells of the day she learned her son Allem had died in the accompanying article provided by the network.

According to the forum host Mike Munro: "Bullying these days isn't confined to the schoolyard or school bus. One in 10 schoolchildren say they've been subjected to cyber bullying: text messages, emails and in chatrooms.

"And it can happen every hour of every day at home with parents totally unaware of what their children are going through."

logged on and again there were threatening messages, all by the same culprit, the same person who had texted Allem's phone.

We both knew that he wasn't one of Allem's close friends. He'd

Both Ali and I are trying to cope as best we can with our only child's death. We find it so difficult as we look back to see if there was anything we had missed with his behaviour, warning signs that could have alerted us to the problem.

When I do look back, I remember times he was on the computer and typing so hard and so loud. It was anger typing. He was being tormented by the same person. It should've been a sign.

I should've gone in the room and asked whether everything was OK. But we didn't know; we just had no idea of the potential harm that lies in cyberspace.

He was in his room, in our house with us, and he was safe, or so we thought. How could someone hurt him? Just like his mobile, why didn't we check it?

We had no idea.

We were so naive, believing bullying happens only in the schoolyard. But bullies have new



Allem Halkic, who committed suicide at the age of 17



Friends and family at Allem's memorial service

known Allem for only about four months; we also knew he was four years older than our son.

The police wanted to help us so much and did everything in their power to gather statements from

Allem's friends and collect as much evidence as they could.

It took about six months of intense investigation for the police to charge the individual. There is no case to date in Australia where

weapons of choice: mobile phones, computers. And with such ready access to these things, any child is susceptible to the threat of cyber bullying.

It hurts us so much to know Allem was going through this torment over a period of time, and that it was at its most aggressive in his last few hours.

There's no doubt in our minds that the bullying and the threats he received triggered his decision to take his life.

It's been just more than a year now, and Ali and I are doing everything in our power to make parents aware of the potential hazards out there in cyberspace.

I wish someone had warned us of the dangers. If they had, things would've been different. I know Allem would be here with us today, if we had known then what we know now.

We're not saying take the tools away because, on the flip side,

computers are a great educational tool. But what we urge is for children and teens to use their computers in the open, where parents can see.

Switch off their mobile phones and remove them from your children at night.

We are also trying to implement laws for cyber bullying. We hope our son's case, the first of its kind to go to court, will play a role in the toughening of laws against cyber bullies.

We honestly don't know what to expect. We do know it's going to be a long and arduous process, but we hope the culprit is made an example of.

Bullies have to take responsibility for their actions, especially ones who hide behind computer screens. They are nothing but cowards.

Our son was such a beautiful, innocent child. He did not deserve this. Nobody does.

MICHAEL BODEY

THE co-creator of *Dora The Explorer*, Chris Gifford, displays a blissful humility about the pre-school phenomenon's influence.

"We create a willingness, or hopefully inspire kids, to want to learn and we always get the credit for it!" he laughs.

He and *Dora's* co-creators Valerie Walsh Valdes and Eric Weiner must take some credit, though. They knew something others didn't because *Dora The Explorer* has become a programming and merchandising staple of Viacom's Nickelodeon network Nick Jr and the most popular pre-school brand in Australia.

It is an unlikely outcome considering *Dora* is a little Latino girl who bounces through tomboy-like adventures with a monkey called Boots, guided by a talking map while being harassed by a fox, Swiper, that has no motivation.

Nickelodeon knew it must have been on to something 10 years ago.

Gifford says *Dora's* evolution from idea to pilot took a year, an incredibly short period for TV development. And that incorporates her original incarnation as a bunny having an adventure with her mummy before morphing to a little girl with a mouse and then a Latino.

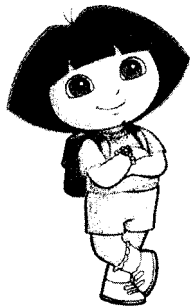
She is now presented in 33 languages and the bilingual nature of her show (she speaks English with a smattering of Spanish in most territories) has been influential among children in dual-language households. Nickelodeon's research shows the second language is no longer an embarrassment for children because *Dora* "speaks two languages just like me".

"That celebration of being bilingual in the bilingual community has been great and in the English-speaking community it's been inspiring," says Gifford.

As *Dora* celebrates her 10th birthday this year with a number of charity events and campaign and fund-raising initiatives, Gifford says "the goal right now is to keep *Dora* as an evergreen character".

That already includes the *Dora Live!* stage shows (currently touring Australia with benefit shows for Camp Quality) and might encompass a new 3D computer-generated imagery version of the character, or *Dora* growing into a tween.

The thought horrified some US parents because in concept art,



Tomboy Dora

they saw a silhouette of *Dora* and thought she had a miniskirt on.

"They got pissed (off) and I don't blame them," Gifford says. "I

Parents need more effective game ban

The Advertiser, 23 March 2010

THE 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 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 if the protection of children is better served by the current system or by a liberalisation of the classification system. The argument liberalisation would enhance protection of children is breathtaking in its disingenuousness. It relies on the proposition some games are 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 there is other material, of even higher impact, that is being kept out of the market but would be legally available if the gamers had their way.

The proponents of R18+ argue we have to let more and stronger violence into the market, to provide children with the necessary protection from inappropriately violent material.

The alleged misclassification of games in Australia is debatable as it is supported by the observation 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 the criteria for classifi-



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cation are the same in all countries - that R18+ in Australia means the same as R overseas.

This assumption cannot be sustained. Nor is there any reason to believe classifiers somehow would change their views on the material they rate MA15+, just because R18+ were legalised. If they are saying that material is suitable for minors, how could the legalisation make it unsuitable?

It is simply impossible to argue, with intellectual honesty, the legalisation of R18+ games would mean better protection of children, unless one believes legal R18+ material would not find its way into the hands of children. Such a belief is fanciful.

The people propounding the "legalise-to-protect-children" argument do not identify themselves as having any kind of history of putting children's interests first. Gaming interests have not been motivated to do the research and lobbying they have done 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 was open on its real wishes, as, in my view, those 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 its demands?

I believe it is because they know that in this particular case, the freedom cannot 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 become older.

Children are still children, violence is still violence and parents still need the support the ban on ultra-violent games affords.

What they need is a more effective ban, not a relaxation of the current one. If more effectiveness cannot be achieved, the status quo is better than the alternative. At least the higher-end material still is 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 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 surely never can be said to outweigh the need to protect children from ultra-violent material.

Evergreen *Dora* dreams of life as a tween

felt really reassured and appreciated the passion these parents had for that character and making sure she didn't go off in a direction they didn't want to go."

Gifford was initially reluctant to "age *Dora* up" but now feels a certain responsibility to deliver a female tween character that is not so fashion or beauty oriented as the rest of the market.

Other entertainment companies cynically accelerate young girls into the advertising friendly zone of fashion and cosmetics through characters such as Barbie or the *High School Musical* franchise.

"What we're trying to do — not that we want to talk much about it — if *Dora* gets older for anything there will be a pro-social piece to

it, an adventure, it'll be about teamwork, she'll stay very true to her basic character," he says.

"I think that's what parents are hoping for if *Dora* were to go older, not go in the Barbie or Bratz direction."

So, there is immense pressure to replicate *Dora's* success?

"Sure," Gifford mumbles a little sheepishly.

Dora remains a Nickelodeon creation. Gifford is fine with that; his enthusiasm for connecting with kids through storytelling is apparent when he attends the live *Dora* show.

"(I have) no frustration, I do fine," he says with a grin. "Nickelodeon has done an incredible job marketing this property and that's not where my skills lie, I like

to tell the stories to little kids." *Dora's* story is a lesson in content creation. The basic premise was to deliver a "hero's journey show, where a character goes on an adventure and along the way overcomes obstacles using the pre-school curriculum".

While most young children's entertainment is home-based and sketch or task-focused, *Dora* has followed a "hero's journey", precisely as the characters in the always-successful Pixar Animation movies including *Toy Story*, *Finding Nemo* and *Cars* do.

Gifford is frustrated when the show is described as a game show. "It's not a game show because we work really hard to the point of my going out every week or so and testing out a 20-30 page story

book we've designed for each episode," he says.

"And that story is really well-researched and thought through because pre-schoolers get frightened pretty easily, the education has to be on a level they can solve it, and yet challenging enough to keep them interested. It's tricky."

Dora has also ushered in a teamwork-oriented vision of child's play. Only Humphrey B Bear has a more even temper.

"For *Dora* the partnership with the home viewer is the most important thing, finding ways to make sure the viewer feels part of the adventure in a key way," says Gifford.

"That's the key to the show's success, for kids to feel *Dora* can't do it without them."

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