

# **Sex, violence and harm in games: An analysis of the guidelines for classification of the Film and Publication Board of South Africa**

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## ***Abstract***

Game ratings are intended to protect children from potentially harmful experiences by defining categories for disturbing, violent or sexual material. This paper analyses assumptions about video game play as revealed in the policies and practices of South Africa's Film and Publication Board. We focus specifically on the interpretation of guidelines used to rate games according to the presence of 'classifiable elements' such as violence and sexual content, the use of public input, and raters' interpretations of the guidelines. Currently, young people have no input in this process and adult perceptions set game ratings agendas. This paper explores how young people respond to game ratings in relation to their experiences with different game genres. We identify how rating practices and policies make particular assumptions about games - what games are, the contexts in which gaming takes place and how they construct a specific narrative of childhood. This paper argues that the policies and practices of South Africa's Film and Publication Board in regulating the distribution of games have emphasized 'protection' and reinforced parental and state power to the exclusion of paying attention to the voices of young people and respecting their rights to freedom of expression.

## ***Introduction***

Over the past two decades, online and mobile distribution of digital media and games have dramatically changed the ways in which governments and parents around the world are able to regulate or mediate children's and teens' access to media. Digital games have emerged from relative obscurity and are now a major media industry. Global video game sales amounted to \$67 billion in 2010, with online gaming projected to account for \$11.9 billion in 2011 and expected to grow by 27% by 2015 (Rose, 2011).<sup>1</sup> Also during this period, media regulation in South Africa has undergone an equally fundamental shift as the country moved from the highly restrictive censorship practices of the apartheid regime to a democratic society where freedom of expression is constitutionally protected. Currently both government and citizens are grappling with the social and political consequences of these new forms of media and relatively new freedoms.

Equally complex shifts have been associated with the legal and regulatory approaches to children's rights in South Africa in this period. Under the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996, henceforth the Constitution), a young person is considered a 'child' until they reach the age of eighteen. The Constitution establishes a range of rights which apply specifically to children. Under Section 16 of the Bill of Rights in the Constitution, freedom of expression is extensively protected, including freedom of the press and the media, the freedom to receive or impart information or ideas, academic freedom and freedom of artistic creativity (16, 1996).<sup>2</sup> The Constitution does not explicitly restrict children's right to freedom of expression in any way, but does emphasize children's right to 'care' (by parents, family or appropriate alternatives), and their right to protection from maltreatment, neglect, abuse or degradation (28, 1996).

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<sup>1</sup> The projected estimate of \$74 billion by 2011 included \$44.7 billion in game sales (software) while consoles and other hardware were expected to account for \$17.8 billion and online gaming \$11.9 billion.

<sup>2</sup> This right does not extend to forms of expression which incite actual violence, such as propaganda for war, incitement of imminent violence, or hate speech of the type which constitutes 'incitement to cause harm' (1996, 16:1249).

This rights discourse attempts to rectify the abuses of children and young people during the apartheid era and also responds to a history where generations of young people made their voices heard in liberation movements, often defying both the authority of adults and the repressive state. Rights discourses have begun to shift South African law away from traditional principles of parental power over children towards child-centred approaches, notably in the Children's Act 38 (2005)<sup>3</sup>. Such child-centred approaches have attempted to establish childhood as a protected space of safety and to ensure that young people's voices are heard. By re-establishing the category of 'child' they also function to buttress severely eroded structures of adult authority.

This paper provides an overview of how controversial game content and transgressive genres of gameplay have shaped regulation of the games industry. We analyse the concepts of childhood which inform current South African legislation and assesses the assumptions made in the legislation in relation to current research about children as media audiences and in relation to some data about how a small group of middle class boys (ages 9 to 12) respond to game ratings.

Cinema viewing and film genres provide the central paradigm for current legislation and guidelines. This paper introduces gaming from the perspective of game studies as a specific and distinct form of media practice which cannot be equated to film viewing. We address the scant attention to children's gaming practices in South Africa in current regulatory practices, in particular the Film and Publication Board's Guidelines for Classification. We use the term 'ludic' activity to encompass Caillois's notion of *ludus*, or "activity organised under a system of rules that defines a victory or a defeat, a gain or a loss" as well as *paidea*: "physical or mental activity which has no immediate useful objective, nor defined objective, and whose only reason to be is based in the pleasure experienced by the player" (Frasca, 1999).

Our study introduces data from a small-scale ethnographic research project with middle-class children (Pallitt, 2011). It thus represents only a beginning point for research of this kind, given the diversity of children in this country. Nonetheless, the data suggests that many children play games which are considered age-inappropriate and that they demonstrate a nuanced understanding of the complexities of the genres. Their age-coding of genres establishes maturity and masculinity and responds to the differences between or in terms of the circumstances in which gameplay takes place. We believe an entirely passive construction of children's media use, as a form of contagion ('exposure') is of little value in understanding the choices made by the young people discussed in this study. An analysis, informed by cultural studies of gaming, provides insight into how such choices are mediated by young people's identity construction as gendered subjects in South African consumer culture.

## ***Games and Freedom of Expression***

As a result of the many controversies about game content, several U.S. states have attempted to limit the sale of violent video games to minors, but all have been ruled against on the grounds of the U.S. First Amendment, which protects freedom of speech in the United States. Courts found that social science research could not support claims that violent video games could be considered responsible for directing or inciting acts of violence or that the purported relationship between violent games and aggressive behaviour was any greater than with other types of media violence, such as television, movies, or indeed that the influence of games outweighed other known factors such as poverty (Kenyata, 2008).

A survey of parents in the U.S. found that parents needed detailed content descriptors that could be applied across media types, but did not agree about the ages at which different kinds of content were considered appropriate for children (Gentile et al, 2011). These differences in judgements about what kinds of content are 'age-appropriate'

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<sup>3</sup> As amended by the Children's Amendment Act 41 of 2007. The Act which came into force on 1 April 2010

are reflected in the fact that ratings and classification systems in the U.S. for example, tend to be more accepting of violence, while European systems are more accepting of sexual material.

Federman suggests that rating systems need to 'maximise description and minimise judgement' because descriptors are more attuned to the ethos of freedom of expression than are judgements: 'A society that values freedom of expression should be extremely cautious about assigning warning labels to ideas' (1998:129)

## **The Film and Publications Act**

Freedom of expression has barely featured in the regulation of children's media or the games industry in South Africa. In South Africa, children have their constitutionally protected freedoms limited in several ways by the Films and Publications Act 65 of 1996 and its Amendments (henceforth the Act). The 1996 Act replaced apartheid-era predecessors (Burns, 2001: 144-5) and made provision for regulation of the distribution of films, games and printed publications through classification, age restrictions and consumer advice while extending special protection to scientific, documentary, literary and artistic expression. The Act was initially drafted to allow maximum freedom of expression to adults, while protecting children (under eighteen) from 'exposure' to 'harmful or disturbing material' (S3,1996). 'Harm' is defined broadly as negative impact on a child's development into a socially-responsible person who respects the basic and fundamental human rights of all peoples (Film & Publications Board, 2006). Since 1996, a series of increasingly stringent amendments have extended the Act's initially limited powers and have further restricted children's rights to freedom of expression and information. <sup>4</sup>

The Act subjects films and games to classification prior to publication (censorship), but only classifies 'publications', whether print or internet, if complaints are received. Apart from constitutional limitations, restrictions depend on the presence, frequency and intensity of certain 'classifiable elements', or content deemed to be "disturbing, harmful or inappropriate for children below a specified age" (Government Gazette 29816, 2007, p.2), such as representations of violence, explicit sex, or nudity. In the context of children's access to media, this distinction privileges books over audiovisual media, thus arguably according greater freedoms to the middle class children who are more likely to use books and printed publications for their entertainment.

## **Rating games in South Africa**

Rating systems in the USA such as those of the MPAA and ESRB are justified as a way of helping parents guide their children's media experiences and exposure (Funk, Flores, Buchman, Germann, 1999). Games can be classified by means of age categories, which judge the suitability of a game for various ages. Alternatively, or in addition, content advisories label certain predetermined types of game content.

In relation to children's media use in South Africa, the objects of the Act now include the protection of children from 'premature exposure to adult experiences' (2, 2009). This establishes a normative distinction between

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<sup>4</sup> The amendments have focused on updating the Act to deal with networked distribution of digital media, but have perhaps primarily aimed to crack down on child pornography or limit children's access to sexually explicit materials. Attempts to regulate hate speech or violent speech, (which are arguably equally prevalent and problematic in the society) have been conspicuously absent. A particularly controversial amendment of the F&P Act was passed into law in 2009 by President Jacob Zuma. The 2009 Amendment applied certain new forms of pre-publication censorship to sexually explicit media and was justified in term of protecting South African children from 'against inappropriate media content' [check ref]. (newspapers were eventually granted an exemption from this restriction).

'children's experiences' and 'adult experiences', thus imposing a single developmental trajectory for all young people.

In addition, the new amendments address the provision of consumer advice so that adults are able to make choices 'for the children in their care' by guiding their viewing, reading and gaming. This orientation assumes that adults rather than children make decisions about children's media use.

A pool of examiners are employed to classify films and games and are nominated by the public and the Deputy Minister of Home Affairs in consultation with the CEO of the FPB. The same pool of examiners is used for both films and games although a different process is applied to games.

## **Defining a public**

In interpreting the regulatory intent of the Guidelines, the Board justifies its decisions in relation to a posited set of "South African standards" considered acceptable by an imaginary "South African community". The decision to establish a single national standard or set of judgements despite considerable cultural, political and religious diversity in the country is not clarified.

The public who have been consulted in occasional research projects have, to date, mostly excluded South African children, focusing on parent's opinions (e.g. Chetty & Basson, 2007). One non-representative survey of internet and pornography use was conducted with 934 13-17 year olds from Gauteng, KZN and the Western Cape from schools in areas likely to have access to the internet (Chetty & Basson, 2006).

## **Defining childhood**

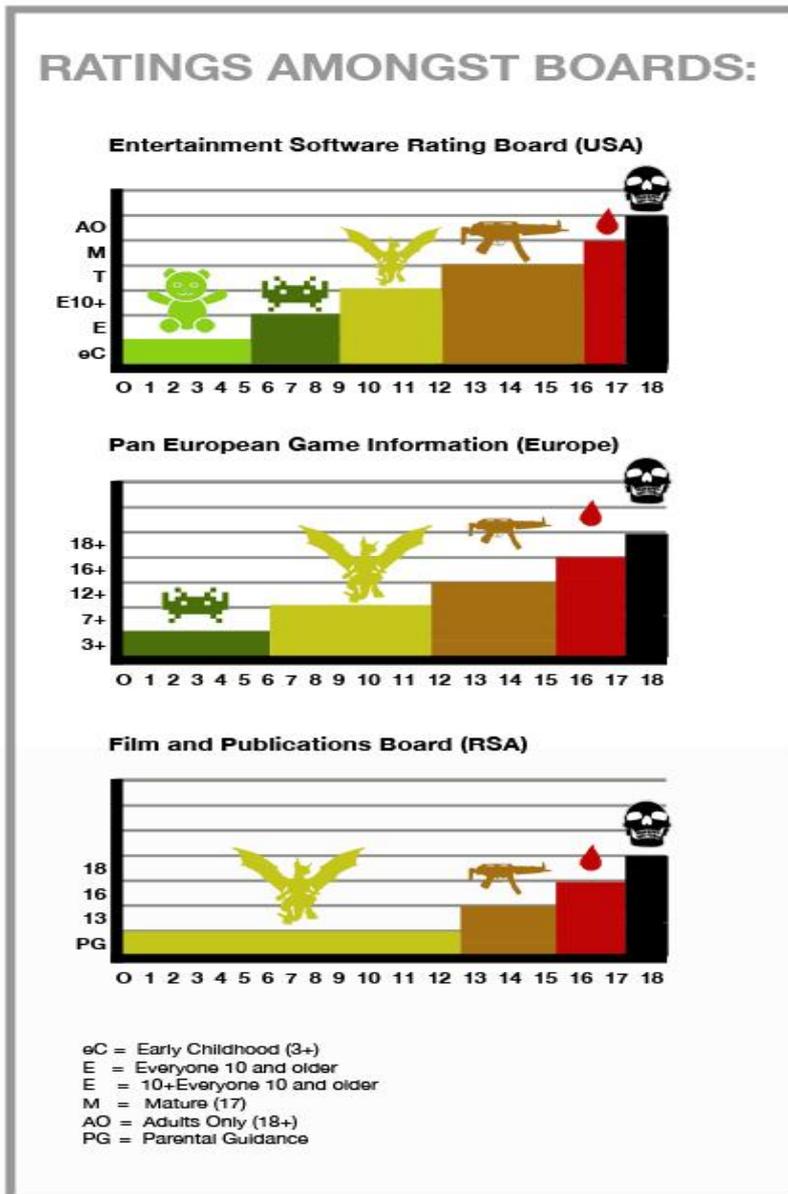
Figure 1 indicates how different age categories are defined by the ESRB, PEGI and the FPB, respectively. Overall, the granularity of the FPB's classification is clustered in the teen years. This suggests that the Board is preoccupied with regulating young people on the threshold of adulthood, who may be seen to be a threat to society, rather than informing the parents of younger children from the age groups which are most likely to be vulnerable, at least according to the findings of the available research.

While acknowledging that individual children might respond differently, the classification suggests that greater levels of parental supervision (PG) are needed for children's play with digital games than for their viewing of films. Despite this cautious approach, the Board in fact provides less information for parents than other rating bodies do.

Figure 1 shows that, for the Board, pre-teen age categories are entirely undifferentiated. While the ESRB and PEGI have 3 and 2 pre-teen age categories respectively, and do not categorise anything as suitable for the ages 0-2, the Board lumps together infants, early and later childhood, and preteens in the PG category. By contrast, the FPB's age categories for film include four different categories. If the function of the rating system is to help the consumer make informed choices, the PG category provides little information and would require parents to play the entire game with their children.

Furthermore, the Board's advisory stickers on game packaging do not provide definitions of classifiable elements identified in the game. These stickers in fact often obscure the ratings of other rating bodies, which are often more informative. For example, the Pan European Game Information (PEGI), includes both symbols and their explanations symbols on the back of the game. PEGI also include 'fear' as a category which indicates that content may be frightening to younger children (<http://www.pegi.info/en/index/id/33/>). Neither do they contextualise them by noting the genre of the game.

The Board's own research (e.g. Chetty & Basson, 2007) suggests that parents find the ratings vague, and no research is available to account for children's own understanding of the ratings.



**Figure 1:** Age ratings as applied by international rating boards

While the rationale for the new legislation is a seemingly child-centred construction of childhood, the Act excludes young people’s decision making from its model of media use, and does not address the need to prepare children and young people to encounter the media and to use it for their own informational and expressive purposes rather than only ‘protecting’ them from it.

The motivation to ‘protect’ children has been applied with particular severity to digital games. Game-specific regulations have only been included in the Guidelines since 2009 . These treat games with more caution than either films or publications, judging that no games are suitable entertainment for unsupervised children under the age of

thirteen. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to make judgements about harm, it seems that the Guidelines' regulatory claims about the harmful nature of games are not based on evidence<sup>5</sup>.

South African public discourse is perhaps most influenced by discussions of 'media effects', which assumes (and sometimes finds) harmful direct effects of media use (e.g. Gentile & Anderson, 2003).

In contrast, cultural studies, adopting qualitative or ethnographic methods in search of the 'insider meanings' of children's culture finds that thoughtful and meaningful media use, including transgressive uses, is central to children's and young people's self-expression and popular culture. & Basson, 2007).

The current approach also fails to account for the ludic, or playful modality of games. The Guidelines encourage parents to be particularly wary of games, since, they claim, players are not passive viewers but active participants. Consequently, they argue, 'low impact' violence in a film might have to be regarded as 'moderate or high impact' in a game. In support of this judgement, the guidelines report, highly inaccurately, that skilful play in many games "involves the killing of innocent human beings" and that games reward players for killing "even the innocent" (2009:14). The guidelines express particular concern that classifiable elements such as violence, sexual activity, nudity or drugs should not be used as incentives or rewards in games.

A stronger ludic sensibility would recognise the epistemological distance between a game character and a human being, and would acknowledge that the complex skills of digital gameplay bear little or no resemblance to the mechanics of killing, and the pleasure of a 'virtual' reward in a game is very different to the pleasures of the real thing.

The constitution states that a child's best interests are paramount in all matters concerning a child (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996). Research is required to investigate whether protecting children from controversial material in games may be limiting them in other ways, and indeed how young people feel about having their freedom limited in this way.

### ***Gaming controversies and transgression***

Multiple dimensions divide socially acceptable media content from its unacceptable variants. For publishers, transgression can be used to gain attention or notoriety, which both have market value. For players, and particularly young players, appropriating or understanding the significance of transgressive game content signifies identities such as masculinity or adulthood. In this section we discuss how transgressive and controversial content

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<sup>5</sup> In justification, the Film and Publication Board's guidelines for classification of computer and video games cites research from a now defunct website by the National Institute on Media and the Family, an organisation which no longer exists. Features of certain transgressive genres (gangster games, notably the GTA series) are generalised to all games. These are referred to as 'themes' of particular concern because they 'normalize anti-social behaviour in teenagers'. The guidelines warn that research into the effects of interactive games suggests "a high correlation between the playing of video games and aggressive behaviour and desensitization to violence" (2009:14). This appears to fly in the face of findings that media effects of violent games is lower than that of television (Goldstein, 2005; Sherry, 2001). Early local research into television viewership and violence found television to be only one among many socialising agents which correlated weakly with aggression, and that it should be considered as part of a complex of other factors such as personality, parental attitudes, social class, cultural attitudes and community experiences of violence in South Africa (Botha, 1998).

associated with horror genres, criminal fantasies, ethnic stereotyping, and sexuality in games has shaped and is also shaped by evolving systems of rating content.

Controversies about game genres are focused on their representational dimension, and seldom take into account the complexity of the relationships (Burn & Carr, 2006) game genres set up between players, producers and game texts. In this section we provide an overview of gaming controversies and contextualise them in terms of cultural studies of the social practices of players and producers.

Transgressions can relate to cultural, religious or political attitudes towards sexuality or nudity (repression and silence vs. confession and titillation vs. gendered exploitation, rights and power). The contextual meanings of violence in the game's narrative can also be transgressive (legitimated violence e.g. by police or military vs. anti-hero criminal fantasy). Similarly, the ideologies of power expressed through violence are another dimension of transgression, where violence is legitimated by the ethnicity or gendering of the victim. It is also influenced by the representational qualities of the game (perceptual realism vs. non-realistic modalities). Another factor relates to the way in which the game positions the player in relation to the action (first person vs. third person views, visceral close-up vs. distanced and cerebral 'god games'). Finally, the function of violence in the specific genre is another key dimension (e.g. violence has different functions in documentary than in horror or in comedic genres).

### **Legitimated violence**

Narratives of legitimated violence pit the police and military or other heroes against inhuman opponents, criminals or military enemies. Playing the role of the 'good guy' in such a narrative can attract controversy, particularly if the game strays too close to realism or to the pleasures of horror genres. In 1992, the horror-themed *Night Trap* (saving young women from vampires, rendered in full motion video), and *Mortal Kombat* (a fighting game served up with generous helpings of relatively realistic blood and gore) both drew attention from the US Congress (Kenyata, 2008). The media furore and state pressure, led to the inception of the U.S. Entertainment Software Review Board (ESRB) in 1994 as a form of self-regulation by an industry body which provided content ratings and consumer advice.

Early first person shooters had shock value because the player shared the perspective of a killer on a surfeit of blood and gore while experiencing sometimes intensely frightening yet enjoyable affect. Subsequent media panics about games escalated after killings such as the Columbine High School shooting in 1999, which was linked to violent video games because of the teenaged killers' enthusiasm for id Software's *Doom* (1993) a gory science-fiction themed 3D first person shooter. Here yet another line, that separating game world from real world was perceived to be crossed.

### **Pleasures of horror**

Pleasure in horror depends on the stimulation of fear (Burn, 2010), but controversies about the horrific aspects of games don't recognise that, for many children, this fear may involve a sense of enjoyment rather than harm. Young gamers who enjoy horror genres have much in common with young viewers of horror films (Buckingham, 1996), where pleasure is derived from slipping between an intellectual awareness of artifice through the subversive pleasures of the 'gory' content to the social rite of passage which involves gaining power over fear. Horror games (and films) allow access to 'liminal adult pleasures' (Burn, 2008:164). By cultivating such spectacular and transgressive popular tastes, older children and young teens are able to imagine and enact a departure from childish innocence and obedience or (in the case of young men) the middle-class decorum associated with school and boyhood (Burn, 2008:164).

## Criminal fantasies

Criminal fantasies explore stories about antiheroes where the player identifies with sympathetically portrayed or parodied criminal figures, and where the game's action involves illegal violent and other activities. These are more controversial than narratives where conflict is resolved by legitimated violence. For example, the first controversies about games in the US focused on Exidy's arcade game *Death Race* (1976). *Death Race* was based on a movie with the tagline "In the year 2000, hit and run driving is no longer a felony. It's the national sport!", and players ran down 'gremlins', a sanitised version of the 'pedestrians' who had inspired the title of an earlier version of the game.

This formula was adopted by the *Grand Theft Auto* series (*GTA*). Courting controversy has been a winning strategy for this series. The broad appeal of the series rests on enjoyable gameplay and it has won many critical accolades. *GTA's* outrageous criminal fantasies have been a reliable source of moral panic, which have fed the popularity of the series with a predictable series of headlines and word of mouth marketing in the process. The series has sold over 100 million copies worldwide.<sup>6</sup>

Originally imagined as a 'multi-player car racing and crashing game' (DMA Designs, 1995) the *GTA* games are action adventures set in vast sandbox-style urban environments which allow players to wander freely, undertake missions, steal cars, join gangs, evade arrest and mow down pedestrians. Its formula of anti-hero narratives and anti-social violence reliably provides shock-value and appeal among young males. Paradoxically, this group, who are arguably its core market are almost universally barred by the game's ratings. The formula has also inspired lawsuits claiming it is a 'cop killing simulator' training players in lawlessness.<sup>7</sup>

Earlier versions (1997, 1999) of the game attracted minimal controversy, perhaps because the criminal mayhem was experienced from a top-down view of the city, which gave a rather distant perspective on the crime spree. The next version (*GTA III*, 2001) adopted a more intimate third person perspective. A later version, *GTA IV* (2008), captured the headlines for including drunk driving sequences.

## Ethnic stereotypes

Ideologically, games such as *GTA* are controversial because of their reliance on ethnic stereotypes. They can be seen as interactive Blaxploitation equivalents of '*Boyz n the Hood*', glamorizing violence while marking 'young black bodies as disposable' (Barrett, 2006:95) and gaining shock value from 'extreme racialized tropes' (Leonard, 2006). *GTA Vice City* (2002), sparked protests from various groups who protested the game's use of ethnic stereotypes -- Italian American, Latino American, and Caribbean American groups, and in particular a mission which instructed the player to "kill the Haitians."

*GTA: San Andreas* in particular has sparked outrage about its representation of 'gangsta' culture and stereotyping of African American male characters as criminals, and black and Latino communities riddled with violence and crime. The game narrative traces the story of CJ (Carl Johnson), an African American anti-hero who experiences violence and police victimisation and subsequently progresses through various missions as an inner-city gang member until he becomes a criminal kingpin.

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<sup>6</sup> Take-Two: *GTA IV* hits 20m, *BioShock* series at 8m". Take-Two Interactive. 2011-03-10.

<http://www.vg247.com/2011/03/10/take-two-drops-franchise-figures-gta-iv-sells-20-million-bioshock-series-at-8-million>. Retrieved 2011-03-10

<sup>7</sup> CNN Headline News - Grand Theft Morality Pt.2 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZqSCLrtioEI> Retrieved 2008-05-07.

## Appropriating marginal identities

In contrast to textual 'readings' of *GTA: San Andreas*'s controversial content, DeVane and Squire interviewed young gamers and showed how their diverse activities as 'textual poachers' (Jenkins, 1992) appropriated the possibilities for action and meaning in the game, redesigning and reworking it in the process (DeVane and Squire, 2008:267). While an older group of white gamers used the game to inhabit marginalised identities, they did not simply reproduce discriminatory discourses but could identify negative racial stereotypes and read the game as a social satire (DeVane and Squire, 2008:277). African American players experienced a constant threat of actual violence in their lives and consequently interpreted game violence as 'clearly fictional and nearly trivial'. They recognised social issues such as poverty, police corruption and a critique of institutional racism in the game, and used their play to enact a 'provocative masculinity' in social occasions (DeVane and Squire, 2008:273). A younger group of more casual players valued play that was social, competitive and an opportunity for performative display before their peers (DeVane and Squire, 2008:277). These players were attracted to the game partly because of the presence of hip hop music as public articulation of inner-city youth subcultures and marginalised young black males (De Genova, 1995; Kelly, 1999; Rose, 1994; hooks, 1992). (DeVane and Squire, 2008:265)

## Sexuality and sexism in games

Sexuality is considered off-limits for children's entertainment. After the inception of game ratings by the ESRB, any sexual content meant higher ratings, which barred access to mass retailers such as Walmart in the U.S.

Consequently sexuality did not feature strongly in most games. An early exception to this was Mystique's *Custer's Revenge* (1982) for the Atari VCS 2600, where the player was instructed to

"guide a naked, horny, General Custer across the screen while avoiding incoming arrow fire. Waiting at the other side is a naked Indian maiden, and you earn points by . . . scoring. The slogan of the game was something like 'When you score, you score!'

The pixelated graphics (*Space Invader* vintage) of *Custer's Revenge* were far removed from pornographic genres, but the sexist fantasy of colonial rape was enough to put it beyond the pale. Nonetheless, this ludic parody of pornography and of the instrumental masculinist approach to sex as 'scoring' or 'collecting' are themes which emerged in other games with sexual themes, such as the later versions of *GTA*. As game graphics improved, the medium's potential for visual eroticism developed. Older gamers responded to stories with a sexual dimension, while teens were attracted to the forbidden fruit of nudity or pornographic content. Not least, sex could be counted on to grab the attention of politicians and media alike.

*GTA III* garnered particular controversy for a 'hooker cheat', another ludic version of the 'sexual fix', which both parodied and countered sexual health discourses by allowing players to pick up a sex worker to recover 'health' (one dollar per health point). Even more controversially, players could regain their money and keep their health, if they subsequently killed the sex worker and stole her money.

*GTA San Andreas* (2004) gained notoriety when hackers found a way to tweak variables to uncover a normally hidden interactive sex minigame allowing the player as main character Carl "CJ" Johnson to take part in a sex scene which was only overheard in the unmodified 'dating mission'. If the player works out how to 'push UP and DOWN in rhythm' to please the girlfriend, Denise, he raises an 'Excitement' bar and Denise admonishes him 'That's the spot, remember, nice guys finish last'. If he succeeds, she cries out in poorly animated ecstasy 'You the man! Oh yeah! You the man!'. If the player cannot maintain the required rhythm and Carl collapses prematurely, the screen reads 'Failure to satisfy a woman is a crime'.

## Marking masculinity

Much like horror, content such as this activates a variety of pleasures. The erotic titillation of such sequences is limited. Nonetheless, the mere presence of sexual content, particularly in its sexist or misogynist varieties is a marker of a counterhegemonic masculinity and a decisive break from childish identities. By parodying pornographic conventions or sexual advice columns, the game includes the player in an in-joke. It requires understanding the game as rule-governed system which can be manipulated through a mod, and this mastery is an additional marker of masculinity or prowess (Burn, 2008).

According to Buckingham and Bragg (2004), children and young people frequently encounter sexual material in the media, which contains a diverse range of 'messages'. Children value the media as a source of information relative to other sources, such as parents or the school, but do not necessarily trust what they find in the media. Children (and parents) are aware of media regulation, but reserve right to make their own judgements (Buckingham and Bragg (2004).

In the following section, we identify the ways in which middle class children in South Africa respond to certain kinds of controversial and transgressive content.

## Methodology

An initial study was conducted by one of the researchers (Nicola Pallitt) at a middle-class primary school for boys in Cape Town. A total of 103 boys (aged between 11 and 13 years) participated in the study, including one Grade 6 class and four Grade 7 classes. The boys completed a short two-page questionnaire followed by a worksheet with a space for them to draw and provide commentary about their favourite games. A follow-up lesson asked them to design a 'South African' game.

Further discussions were conducted with five boys (ages?) at a holiday club in the same suburb, where Nicola conducted fieldwork as a participant observer, observed children playing age-appropriate digital games, and ask them questions about games. Parents gave written consent for their children's participation in the games sessions at the club. The study was intended to focus on observations of age-appropriate games, but this proved to be an ethical challenge, since childrens' own gameplay repertoires included many games which were rated considerably above their ages.

Participants started bringing their own games consoles and collections of games to the club, perhaps tired of Nicola's small collection. For example, the majority of the children had played The Sims 2? before and had their parents' permission to play the game despite the fact that it is rated for thirteen year olds and up.<sup>8</sup> Thus, by popular demand, The Sims 2? was included in the games on offer at the club.

In some cases, it was not clear to what extent parents were aware of the content of all the games their children played at home. As we describe below, children presented highly complex and often persuasive arguments about how their favourite games were 'overrated' and that the FPB games ratings did not match children's own sense of the suitability of content or of their own maturity.

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<sup>8</sup> This high age restriction is owing to feature whereby a player can make their virtual characters have sex for fun or to 'try for a baby' ('whoo-hoo'). The 'sex' is comical rather than graphic. The children were more interested in dressing their characters or forming relationships between characters than in this sexual content.

## ***Gaming practices***

The completed questionnaires provided insight into the boys' access to games at home. For these boys, computers and PlayStation consoles are the medium of choice for play within a primarily male peer group, which also extends online. 80% of the boys report playing games at home on the computer, 51% on a laptop (owner not specified), 76% report playing games on the Internet and 68% play on a PlayStation. These figures are similar regarding gameplay at friends' houses, with the exception of Nintendo Wii and Xbox games where percentages are higher for playing at friends than at home. Additionally, 75% of the boys report playing games at public places such as games arcades in shopping malls, restaurants and casinos. The people who the boys play games with most often are reported to be brothers (43%), cousins (49%), school friends (81%) and other friends who do not attend the same school (58%). Interestingly, 20% of the boys report playing games with strangers on the Internet, while only 6% play with their mothers. 22% of the boys reported playing games with their fathers. This suggests that gaming is a predominantly male activity in most of these boys' lives, taking place mostly within their own peer group.

The survey ended with questions about the boy's parents opinions of their games. The boys' responses regarding their parents' beliefs about their games varied but several parental complaints formed part of their answers: 1) parents think I play too much and I'm wasting my time, 2) parents do not mind if games are age appropriate, 3) games are expensive, 4) mom complains about games being too violent, 5) gaming is viewed as good by parents if played on the Wii (more active), 6) they like my games, but not X game (where a particular title is mentioned, often *Grand Theft Auto*). Additionally, many of the boys reported that their parents do not mind, care or even watch them play. Although parental mediation of gameplay appeared to be mixed, similar themes were echoed throughout the boys' responses and parents' complaints appear to support dominant discourses on children and games: children required protection and certain games had to be censored from their repertoires.

Regarding favourite games, most wrote down the name of a sports game (mostly soccer games) and a game rated as unsuitable for their ages, such as games from the Grand Theft Auto series, which are discussed further below.

## **Holiday club**

The discussion described below took place with Nicola seated in a circle with Archie<sup>9</sup> (10 years old) and four of his friends from the club. Calvin (9 years), Mike (12 years), Travis (10 years), and Ross (10 years).

One of the boys, Archie, brought some of his PlayStation 3 games from home to play at the club. The main topics of discussion were two first-person shooter games; *Resistance: Fall of Man* (18V) and *Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter* (16V).

## **Games**

*Resistance* is a science fiction horror first-person shooter game where the player takes up the role of a sergeant who works with the human resistance forces to drive an alien invasion (the Chimera) out of Britain. He gets infected by the virus, but unlike the other soldiers he remains human but with added capabilities such as strength. Some of the weapons in the game are futuristic.

*Ghost Recon* is a series of military tactical shooter games. Archie brought Advanced Warfighter (the third instalment in the series) to the club which takes place in 2013 and starts in Mexico City. The player is put in the shoes of a captain who commands the Ghost Recon team. They have to protect US and Mexican presidents, recover stolen technology, battle rebellious Mexican forces and prevent a nuclear attack. As a tactical shooter, the player needs to use cover effectively to stay alive and pay attention to sound for strategic co-ordination.

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<sup>9</sup> Not his real name. All names used are pseudonyms to protect participants' anonymity.

## ***Over-rated***

Nicola had previously allowed ten year olds Chris and Archie to play *Resistance*, since both their parents allowed them to play the game at home and they had completed the game together before during a play date at Archie's house.

Nicola now needed to decide whether or not to allow the boys to play Archie's games at the club. She took Archie and his friends aside for an informal discussion about the games' content and ratings and to probe what kinds of games their parents allowed them to play at home. All the boys except Ross reported that they had played games with similar content and ratings at home. Generally, these were war games such as *Call of Duty* and other horror games such as *Time Splitters*.

Nicola talked to the group about the need to understand that some children were not allowed to play particular games, and that it was important to respect parental preferences around suitable and age-appropriate content. At the end of the discussion it was decided that four of the boys would play and Ross wouldn't.

Owning, playing and displaying knowledge about games carries particularly important social currency for boys of this age. In particular, games rated for older players signify maturity and 'hanging with the big boys'.

The discussion that led up to this conclusion showed how this group of boys made sense of game ratings. It revealed that they had a sophisticated understanding of game ratings. Not only did they know what consumer alert symbols meant, but they were also able to compare the suitability of ratings for games with an identical 'Violence' content advisory, motivating their arguments with carefully explained criteria.

## ***Narrative modality***

The boys apply a reality vs. fiction distinction which suggests the key role of narrative modality in determining judgements of realism and reminding children that games are different to reality and have their own rules (Holm Sorensen & Jessen, 2000). The boys agreed that both games were rated too high for violence and that *Resistance* should be rated lower than *Ghost Recon*.

## ***Social distance and game violence***

Perspective and social distance in games contributed to the judgement of how violent a game is, or how real their experience of the violence is. Mike tells Ross that *Resistance* will not affect him because of the overall shot scale of the game, where the player does not see the aliens 'up close'

The boys interpret 'not that violent' as equivalent to not having good graphics. They cite the example of *Ghost Recon* as a less violent game, because in that game 'you don't see blood'. Their implicit criteria seem to be that less violent actions happen further away and limited detail is visible, 'you don't see blood' and 'you don't see like guts everywhere'.

Archie disagrees, noting that it is optional to switch blood textures on or off. Calvin remarks that his father sets the options to not display the blood, and so all that is seen is 'a red line'.

The researcher asked the boys if they had ever seen *God of War*. At first they appear excited to display their game knowledge, but their talk also shows that this is where they (and their parents) draw the line in terms of game violence:

**Archie:** I love it! But the sad thing is mom and dad won't let me because...

**Mike:** It's more violent than that game (points at *Resistance*).

**Calvin:** You see heads go off.

The boys note that *God of War* is 'also like fiction stuff', but 'much more graphic and violent' because you can stab people and rip their heads off (dismemberment) and 'you can hold the people's heads and the heads will have dripping blood, and you can see the lungs' whereas in *Resistance* 'you just shoot from a distance'. Thus perspective, close contact with enemies and gory details make *God of War* more violent than *Resistance*:

**Mike:** And it's gross!

**Archie:** It's way more graphic!

## **Fake and fiction**

Apart from representational details, the modality of the narrative played a central role in influencing judgements of how real the violence of a game was. It does matter whether players are killing aliens or 'real' people. The boys felt that killing 'real' people was more violent. When talking about *Resistance* they pointed out that the aliens were humans that had 'mutated'. Consequently, they they felt that *Resistance* was 'over-rated' and should be rated much lower:

**Archie:** Because it's incredibly fiction, incredibly fiction, the guns are fiction...

**Mike:** At our age, thirteen and about... you like know that it's fake.

The boys often referred to *Resistance* as 'fake' and 'fiction' which they equate with things that would never happen in real life. In contrast, they judged *Ghost Recon* and *Grand Theft Auto* as more similar to real life, where bombings and killings are very real:

**Mike:** Blow stuff up, kill people, blow stuff up.

**Archie:** But in life, every day.

The boys also pick up on the use of racial differences in games to legitimize war and nuclear attack in *Ghost Recon*, which, in their opinion is 'not racist' because it is something that happens as well 'in real life':

**Archie:** It's like real war, it's like kill the bloody Mexicans and take them down.

**Travis:** But it's not racist because in real life, that's what happens.

**Researcher:** Ja, in war.

**Archie:** Ja, it would. It's basically based on war.

## **Horror**

Overall judgements of age appropriateness among the boys focused on fear rather than violence. They considered games 'overrated' if they did not frighten them. The boys' talk signals an awareness of game genre, particularly the differences between horror and realism. For them, horror games are 'cool' and they enjoyed dramatising the narrative of how they gradually overcame their initial fears about the game *Resistance* and its four-eyed aliens. *Resistance* had a degree of 'creepy' that these boys found exhilarating: the cover shows a skull with bugs crawling in its mouth, aliens with four eyes and protruding cooling systems on their backs, people screaming and the adrenaline rush of aliens 'popping out'.

Archie highlights the appeal of horror games for boys of his age, where being scared of things they know are not real is part of the enjoyment:

**Archie:** Ja, we got better and better and then we'd just run through everything and say that's not real, that's not real, we just made jokes 'cause we don't want to see their faces, they're ugly, I mean look at it!

While the bugs of *Resistance* were ultimately enjoyable, they seemed to find the combination of innocence and horror (of the kind which might only receive a PG rating) even more disturbing. They pointed to the 'creepy' ambiguity of the sackman in *Little Big Planet*, comparing it to the terrifying eeriness of the animated preteen nightmare in Henry Selick's film, *Coraline*:

**Caleb:** It's just like *Coraline*, but...

**Tristan:** It's creepy.

**Akin:** It's stuffed and it walks.

## ***South African designs***

The final lesson at the boys' school was spent developing a design for a South African game. The game design lesson took place at the end of the term and was the final opportunity to engage with the boys about games. Thus the textual analysis below represents the starting point for research in this vein. While several straightforwardly patriotic or educational designs were forthcoming from the class, four of the groups developed designs which could be considered highly controversial and they will thus form the focus of the analysis for this paper.

An analysis of the designs suggests ways in which they express these young middle-class boys' attraction to age-restricted horror genres, as well as their interest in the satirical or comedic criminal fantasies of the *GTA* series and similar games, and indicate how these interests require mediation and discussion, rather than suppression. The narratives play with unease about the absence of a clear dividing line between legitimate state violence and criminal activity in South Africa, between hero and anti-hero, between just rebellion and corrupt degeneracy, and between manhood and the counter-hegemonic masculinity of promiscuity and rape.

The boys as middle-class youth designed games which pointedly and sometimes farcically illustrate parallels between the anti-hero criminal narratives of their favourite games and the uneasy narratives of contemporary South African politics. The game designs are discussed in detail elsewhere (Pallitt and Walton, 2011) but the following examples illustrate the general trend

### **Grand Theft South Africa**

The game 'Grand Theft South Africa' offered players a choice of three political protagonists, Nelson Mandela, Jacob Zuma or Julius Malema, casting them all in the role of criminal anti-heroes familiar from the *GTA* games. The player's goals are listed as to "become president", "take control" and "corrupt SA". The action of the game is conceptualised as an amorphous mix of criminally inspired game mechanics and a caricature of a lawless, narcotized ghetto environment: "Kill, steal, rape, grow up with alc[alcohol] and drugs". Linking the three South African leaders and *GTA*'s ghetto underworld of crime, alcohol and drugs is a parody which, while deliberately hyperbolic, derives at least part of its humour from a particularly racist world view.

### **JZ's revenge**

Another group developed a political concept which satirizes the story of Jacob Zuma's rise to power. This game, entitled *JZ's revenge*, was allocated the game rating of "18 VLS" [Age restriction of eighteen, with parental advisories for violence, language and sex]. The initial concept included a game advisory with N (nudity) and P (prejudice). These were edited out for submission to the teacher, as perhaps 'beyond the pale' for a school assignment.

*GTA*'s pedestrian roadkill was given a satirical slant, with dead civilians providing a source of income for the player as "JZ": "Civilians you kill – taxpayers money". The group also warned that this was a "very sexually active game".

They made reference to Zuma's polygynous family and extensively publicised extra-marital affairs, integrating the following game mechanic for 'levelling up': "More wives – higher level".

## Discussion

According to the law and current media regulations, such narratives of sex and violence would be relegated to the category of 'age inappropriate' themes which they should be considered off-limits to young people until they reach the age of eighteen. These designs, and particularly the racial and class undertones of the narratives require careful mediation and discussion within the context of school curricula, which was unfortunately not possible in the limited time available for the initial study. Their designs nonetheless are highly suggestive of the power of news media in reaching this age group, as well as the limitations of current regulations which mark such topics "off limits" for young people. It also suggests ways in which powerful and problematic cultural narratives such as GTA are providing a generation with a satirical, parodic frame which helps them to make sense of South African politics.

## Conclusions

The data we report in this paper is informed by cultural studies and celebrates children's agency and their strategic use of media (Livingstone, 2007), highlighting the importance of children testing boundaries, playing with frightening material, experimenting with identity, and seeing represented publicly the social problems that adults seek to hide from them

We argue that the policies and practices of South Africa's Film and Publication Board in regulating the distribution of games have emphasized 'protection' and reinforced parental and state power to the exclusion of paying attention to the voices of young people and respecting their rights to freedom of expression. Furthermore, the nature of the 'protection' offered to young people through media ratings and classifications has not yet been carefully interrogated. Special constitutional protection is afforded to young people by defining the category 'children' but when applied to media use, this categorisation effectively infantilises teens and youth, and possibly pre-teens as well. This paper questions the current regulatory assumptions that games are a particularly 'harmful' form of media and calls for recognition of young people as independent beings with growing autonomy and agency in their use of media.

By relying almost entirely on notions of parental responsibility, through 'Parental Guidance' categories, the regulations impose a middle class model of viewership and of care and supervision on care-givers and a retail model of distribution. This is inappropriate given the circumstances of many South African children and parents. It is also increasingly inappropriate for middle class children who operate in a context of growing 'networked individualism' (Castells et al, 2007) where media is designed for individual use and gaming takes place on the internet and on mobile phones, often in private spaces which are outside the purview and knowledge of parents.

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