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Mediawise Video Game Report Card

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This MediaWise Video Game Report Card is the seventh issued by the National Institute on Media and the Family, an independent, non-partisan, non-sectarian, non-profit organization. The Report Card provides a snapshot of the interactive gaming industry with a focus on issues related to child welfare. The full Report Card is available at www.mediafamily.org.

Introduction

"The games of a people reveal a great deal about them."
Marshall McLuhan

Year after year, the electronic gaming industry sees dynamic changes and continued growth. This certainly held true in 2002. Industry analysts predict that worldwide sales this year could exceed $20 billion demonstrating that the industry is all but immune to the economic recession. On-line gaming continues to grow by 50 percent a year. On-line gaming parlors, popular in Korea and Japan, are beginning to appear in American cities. As game graphics and imagery get ever closer to motion picture quality, the games become more realistic, exciting, and attractive to young players. More children and youth are playing than ever before. Ninety-two percent of youngsters ages 2-17 now play video or computer games.

While the industry is making the same efforts to protect children it has over the past few years, research and anecdotal evidence show that the potential for harm from video games is much greater than previously understood. Increasing power (i.e., realism) of technology is one factor; our increased knowledge base is another. Despite some commitment to implementing our past recommendations, the industry is slipping backwards by standing still. Against this backdrop is an increasingly appalling attitude toward women--this issue, more than any other, exposes an industry willing to make money by continuing to push the envelope.

A Dark Cloud Descends Over the Industry

The best selling games of the past year glorify and reward extreme violence, particularly toward women. While these games are rated M (Mature), they are extremely popular with pre-teen and teenage boys who report no trouble buying the games.

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For the past seven years, we have consistently expressed concern about a subset of very violent games called “first person shooters.” In these games the player advances in the game by killing. Even more disturbing this year is the fact that the best selling games of the past twelve months are not only ultra-violent, but feature brutal violence toward women. In addition, a growing number of non-violent games like *BMX XXX* degrade women and reinforce dangerous stereotypes by treating them as sexual objects.

Indicative of this problem is the fact that a major retailer, Zany Brainy, announced on November 26, 2002 that it was pulling all video games off the shelves of its 170 stores. A spokesperson for FAO, the parent company of Zany Brainy was quoted as saying, “We didn't carry any of the games with violence, and it seemed to us that those are the most popular games and *the games that the industry was focusing on.”* (Emphasis added.)

Almost all video games are designed and produced by men. Many games appear to reflect young male fantasies. It is very disturbing that the most popular games reflect a violent and misogynist attitude toward girls and women or treat girls and women as sexual playthings.

Though this problem is not new, it is accelerating. Several years ago we alerted parents about *Duke Nukem*, a game in which the player enters a room where naked women are tied to posts pleading with the gamer (as Duke), “Kill me. Kill me.” In *Grand Theft Auto 3* (GTA 3), the top selling game of the past year, the player is rewarded if he murders a prostitute after having sex with her. However, the trend has reached truly alarming levels with *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City.*

Building on the incredible financial success of *Grand Theft Auto 3*, the latest edition, *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* was released on October 21, 2002. Over 1.4 million copies were sold in two days making it the fastest sales start for a video game in the thirty-year history of the industry. It could become the top selling game ever. Experts predict that *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* will sell 10 million copies grossing almost a half billion dollars. By comparison, *Pokemon*, a phenomenon in its own right, only sold 5.1 million copies. In addition to building on its predecessor’s impressive sales figures, *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* picks up where *GTA 3* left off with violence toward women.

Grand Theft Auto: Vice City is receiving rave reviews for its technical excellence. However, its portrayal and mistreatment of women is disturbing. The brutal murder of women as entertainment is cause for great concern. Parents of both boys and girls should be very alarmed by the following:

- Every day millions of boys and young men are entertaining themselves with a game that denigrates women and glamorizes violence against them. The theory that it is a game that only adults are playing is simply not valid. Our recent survey of boys showed that it is extremely popular with pre-teen and teen males.

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- Parents and other adults are almost totally unaware of the content of the game. We have surveyed over 600 parents and teachers over the past month and less than 3 percent have any knowledge of the anti-female content of the game.
- Studies of exposure to sexual violence (e.g., Linz & Donnerstein, & Penrod, 1988; Mullin & Linz, 1995; Strasburger & Wilson, 2002) suggest that watching even short amounts of sexual violence can desensitize viewers to it. For example, in an experimental study, viewers of films including sexual violence expressed significantly less sympathy for domestic violence victims, and rated their injuries as less severe, than did a no-exposure comparison group (Mullin & Linz, 1995).

Other Areas Covered in the 2002 Report Card

- Accuracy of the ratings.
- Ratings education.
- Retail ratings enforcement.
- Research update.
- Overall grade.
- List of recommended games and games to avoid.

Ratings Accuracy

The Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) has announced it will undertake a review of its current ratings system in early 2003. Due to growing concerns about the current ratings, we applaud that decision. It is well known within the industry that a very violent game can receive a T (teen rating) by simply removing the red pixels indicating blood. The U.S. Army received a T rating for its controversial *America's Army* in this manner. Incomprehensibly, *BMX XXX* did not receive an AO (adults only) rating despite involving scenes of topless strippers.

The industry has made important steps in the last few years to accurately rate all games. However, it is disturbing to see that some of the most popular games with adult themes are inappropriately deemed suitable for younger audiences.

Grade for ratings accuracy……..D

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Ratings Education

We conducted a telephone survey of 40 video game rental or retail stores in large and small cities throughout 12 states. Of the 40 stores, 19 primarily sell computer and video games, 19 primarily rent, and two sell and rent about equally. Half (50 percent) of the stores surveyed are part of a chain of stores.

Forty-seven percent of the stores *say* they educate the public about the ESRB rating system (up from 37 percent in 2001). However, when the manner in which they educate the public is scrutinized, the actual level of public education is about 42 percent of stores. This is up from 33 percent in 2001. In these stores, ratings education was typically conveyed by signs or posters in the stores, listings on the aisles, or displays offering pamphlets.

Stores that are part of chains are more likely to educate the public about the ESRB ratings (55 percent of chain stores compared to 32 percent of independent stores). Stores that primarily rent video and computer games are slightly more likely to have policies for educating the public about the ratings compared to stores that primarily sell games (47 percent and 42 percent, respectively).

Disappointingly, the percentage of employees we surveyed who personally understand the ratings actually declined from 88 percent in 2001 to 77 percent this year. Additionally, the percentage of stores training their employees on ratings fell from 51 percent in 2001 to 32 percent in 2002.

Grade for ratings education…….C

Ratings Enforcement

Policies about Ratings
Only about two-thirds (70 percent) of stores have a policy preventing children younger than 17 from renting or buying games rated M. This does not represent any improvement over previous years (75 percent in 2001 and 68 percent in 2000). We had children between the ages of 7 and 14 make 26 attempts to purchase M-rated games. From this “sting” operation, we find that stores only enforce their ratings policies about one-half of the time (54 percent).

Stores that are part of chains are more likely to have policies preventing children from renting or buying M-rated games (75 percent of chain stores compared to 63 percent of independent stores).

Stores that primarily rent video and computer games are more likely to have policies preventing children younger than 17 from renting or buying games rated M compared to stores that primarily sell games (89 percent and 47 percent respectively).

Despite repeated pleas for an effective system, enforcement is still dismal.

Grade for ratings enforcement by retailers……F

Overall Grade

While we understand there are independent sectors in the gaming industry, the overall grade provides a snapshot of the entire gaming field as it relates to child welfare issues. This year's grade reflects the dramatic increase in violent games and, in particular, games rewarding violence against women. Additional issues influencing this grade include questionable ratings, the growing problem of game addiction, and the continued ease with which children and youth purchase or rent adult games. The diversity of these issues touches nearly every sector of the industry. While we acknowledge an encouraging new trend in family friendly games, the overall grade is intended as a wake-up call to the industry, retailers, and parents about very disturbing trends that accelerated during 2002.

Overall grade……F

Recommendations

1. The industry must make a real commitment, beyond its traditional lip service to keeping games intended for adults out of the hands of children and youth. Profiting from selling children interactive technology that depicts sexual and other serious crimes while claiming to be makers of wholesome entertainment is unacceptable and parents must not stand for it.

2. The ESRB is responding to critiques of its rating system by undertaking a review in 2003. We support that effort and recommend that the ESRB take the lead in creating an independently administered universal rating system that could be used by the game, film, and television industries. Eighty-four percent of parents support the creation of such a system.

3. Microsoft has agreed to install parental controls on the X Box console. We call upon Sony and Nintendo to do the same.

4. Retail and rental stores that have committed to policies preventing the sale or rental of adult games to children and teens should actively enforce these policies.

5. Retail chains and independent stores that have refused to restrict access to adult games should put an enforceable policy in place, a change supported by 92 percent of parents.

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6. Parents need to become more knowledgeable of content and exert greater supervision over the games their children are playing.

7. The industry should continue efforts to educate the public about game ratings.

8. The Advertising Review Council should continue to enforce guidelines for marketing and advertising.

Research Update

The research on the effects of exposure to violent video and computer games continues to suggest that concern is clearly warranted. As we reported last year, Anderson & Bushman (2001) showed a consistent pattern of results across 35 different studies of video games: exposure to violent games increased aggressive thoughts in children and adults, as well as aggressive feelings, physiological arousal, and aggressive behaviors.

Brain research reported by Dr. Vincent P. Mathews of the University of Indiana Medical School on December 2, 2002 showed that playing violent video games resulted in less activity in the section of the brain controlling emotional impulses (RSNA, 2002). The effect was most pronounced with at-risk teens diagnosed with disruptive behavior disorder (DBD). Dr. Mathews told attendees at the 88th Scientific Sessions and Annual Meeting of the Radiological Society of North America, "this information gives credence to what has become a growing concern about what is perceived as increased violence among adolescents." Dr. Mathews' findings may help explain the results of our research with 607 8th and 9th grade students. We found that both the amount and content of play matter (Gentile, Lynch, Linder, & Walsh, 2002). Students who were exposed to more violent games were more likely to get into physical fights. It should be noted that this effect held not only for children predisposed to hostile behavior, but also for the least hostile children. Surprisingly, the least hostile children who played the most violent video games were *more* likely to get into physical fights than the most hostile children who did not play many violent video games. In addition, students who played video games more extensively each day received lower grades in school.

In our study of more than 200 3rd to 5th graders, we found that physical aggression and low school performance are not the only reasons for concern about exposure to violent video and computer games. Children who played more violent video games were more likely to be described by their peers and teachers as mean and rude (Buchanan, Gentile, Nelson, Walsh, & Hensel, 2002). While boys were more likely to play violent video games than girls, both boys and girls

who played violent video games were more likely to show what are known as "relationally aggressive" behaviors.

Taken together, these studies suggest that both the amount and content of video games should be important considerations for parents.

In last year's report card we raised the issue of compulsive game playing as an emerging problem. This year that issue drew additional attention via a series of tragedies involving compulsive game playing. A 24-year-old South Korean man died after playing computer games nonstop for 86 hours (Associated Press, 2002). A 30-year-old man died after seizures brought on by playing video games for approximately 48 hours a week (Middleton, 2002). A 21-year-old man committed suicide after playing the online video game *EverQuest* nonstop for 36 hours (Miller, 2002). While these examples are extreme cases, they illustrate a very real and growing concern regarding video game addiction. In a study of approximately 4,000 *EverQuest* (EQ) players, over half (62 percent) said they would consider themselves addicted to EQ (Yee, 2001). This study gathered many quotes from EQ players, two of which are reproduced below:

> *"…I'm 30 years old, almost 31, and I'm a registered nurse. I take care of terminally ill patients, and I'm an EQ addict. I hate this game, but I can't stop playing. Quitting smoking was NEVER this hard." [f,30]*
>
> *"Yes, I consider myself addicted to EQ. I haven't tried quitting yet, but I will have to in a few months. I don't spend enough time with my 2- year-old daughter. I'm a full-time mom, and my daughter watches TV all day while I play the game. " [f, 27]*

Clearly these adults consider themselves addicted. The question becomes whether we can see these types of addictive behaviors starting earlier in children's video game play. Estimates of the numbers of addicted children and adolescents vary, but studies are beginning to show patterns of play behaviors that are similar to other addictions. In a study of 387 12- to 16-year-olds, 20 percent were classified as currently addicted to playing computer-based video games, and one in four adolescents had been addicted at some point in their lives (Griffiths & Hunt, 1998). Boys were more likely to be addicted, and addicted players were more likely to have begun playing video games at younger ages. Interestingly, children themselves appear to be aware of the danger of video game "addiction." When asked to name the bad things about computer games, teens' number one response was that they were addictive (Griffiths & Hunt, 1998).

In our study of 607 8th and 9th graders, 20 percent of game players said they had felt like they were addicted to video games, 30 percent said their parents tell them they play video games too much, and 40 percent said they have friends they would call "addicted" to video games. This spring we expect more results regarding addiction, but some preliminary analyses suggest that addictive

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patterns correlate with a number of negative outcomes for adolescents. Eighth and ninth grade students who exhibit symptoms of compulsive play also:

- have been playing video games for more years
- watch more television each week
- play more video games each week
- prefer more violence in their video games
- like more violence in their video games now than they did 2 or 3 years ago
- are more hostile
- see the world as a meaner place
- get into arguments with their teachers more frequently
- are more likely to have been involved in physical fights in the previous year
- participate in fewer extracurricular activities
- receive poorer grades in school

The research on video game addiction is still just beginning. However, these early results suggest concern is justified. The results also suggest a possible vicious circle of influence. Children who are more likely to become addicted to video games play more often and are exposed to more violent content (Griffiths & Dancaster, 1995). Increase in playing time results in poorer school performance and fewer extracurricular skill-building activities. The increase in exposure to violent content increases aggressive thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Anderson & Bushman, 2001). Substandard academic and social skills are likely to result in increased frustration with school and peers, and may result in further increases in video game play, continuing the cycle.

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Summary

Accuracy of Ratings	D
Ratings Education	C
Retail Enforcement of Ratings	F
Overall Grade	F

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Game Lists:	Rating:
Parent Alert! Games to avoid for your children.	
1. BMX XXX	M
2. Grand Theft Auto: Vice City	M
3. Dead to Rights	M
4. BloodRayne	M
5. Run Like Hell	M
6. Hunter the Reckoning	M
7. Hitman 2	M
8. Resident Evil 0	M
9. Time Splitters	T
10. Wacked!	T
Positive games for children.	
1. Animal Crossing	E
2. Sly Cooper and the Thievius Raccoonus	E
3. Super Mario World: Super Mario Advance 2	E
4. Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets	E
5. Rollercoaster Tycoon	E
6. Mario Party 4	E
7. I Spy Challenger	E
8. Ty the Tasmanian Tiger	E
9. Yoshi's Island	E
10. Blinx: The Time Sweeper	E

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