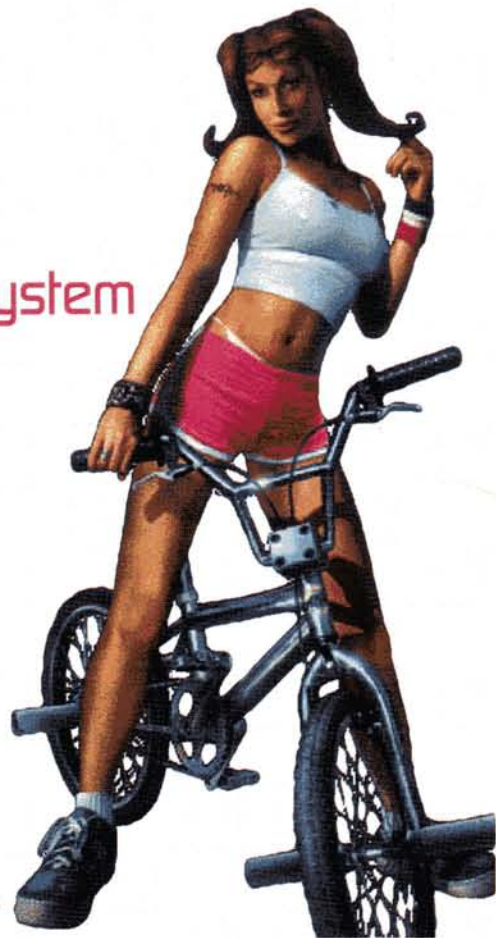


ex ratings

new media and the classification system

PHILLIP CENERE EXPLORES THE CHALLENGES TO OUTDATED SYSTEMS OF FILM CLASSIFICATION PRESENTED BY NEW AND CONVERGING MEDIA.



BMX XXX - refused classification by the OFLC

'Is a game always a game or can it become a film or vice-versa?' This is the question posed by Des Clark, Director of the Office of Film and Literature Classification (OFLC) since 2000, to be discussed on a global level at the International Ratings Conference: Classification in a Convergent World in Sydney this September. Clark, former Deputy Chairman of the Australian Film Commission and Chairman of the Melbourne International Film Festival, says converging media will affect both the way screen product is physically delivered and how it is defined. He also points out that these media will become increasingly flexible. 'We're getting increasingly integrated products that can pose challenges for classification worldwide.'

Despite the recent uproar over the banning of the film *Ken Park* that was scheduled to screen at the Sydney Film Festival, Clark says Australia has a reasonable balance between advisory classification and restrictive classification. 'Ours is in some elements quite liberal but in some areas... some people perceive it as a little bit more restrictive.'

'There are very few people who say we shouldn't have classification. The challenge for the film industry is: how do I make a product designed for a particular market that's going to fit within the system? It's something that will always be a challenge. If you're making a product that you will then market you have to have regard for the classification guidelines.'

What is causing headaches for many filmmakers and distributors is the situation emerging whereby someone who'll be able to see a film may not be allowed to play the video game, or view the text message, or read the book, or visit the website based on the film, because all might have different classification ratings attached.

'The ratings differ from one integration of that product to another, if the elements within it alter,' says Clark. 'You might have, for instance, a PG film and then you might have the director giving an interview for the making of the film in which he starts engaging in high-level language that would cause this product to rate M (unsuitable for children under 15). There are those who would suggest that many of the films that are being marketed are being marketed inappropriately. There are a couple of films that have come out in recent months that are rated M and yet you find that

the t-shirts and the jumpsuits and the support materials are really designed for 6 to 10 year-olds. One has to question the validity of that type of marketing.'

With regards to picture text messaging, television screens installed in elevators and other public spaces, and numerous emerging technologies, some people are wondering how the OFLC will be able to keep pace. 'I think that the issue of public screenings is a challenge that we are going to have to deal with in the future,' says Clark. 'Can the internet truly be censored? I think that the Australian government has established a system of checks on the internet so it will be to a degree. There are sufficient concerns in relation to a lot of internet content that I think are gaining more universal recognition and something needs to be done, but I don't know how you'd do it.'

The picture is also somewhat blurred in Canada, where movie ratings are assigned by individual provinces according to the prevailing community standards for that province, and a total of six classification boards view and classify all films scheduled for public exhibition. The Canadian rating affixed to videos is determined by averaging the ratings of all six classification boards, which may vary according to the community standards in each province. Because of this, the rating of a film on video is sometimes different from its rating in the cinema.

Sharon McCann has worked in the Canadian film and video regulation industry for the past 21 years and has been Chair of Alberta's Film Classification Board for the past 16 years. She says if having six classification boards isn't enough of a problem, each of those boards has also been placed under the jurisdiction of different departments.

'In one province it was the Department of Justice, in a couple of provinces it was the Department of Culture, in another province it's the Department of Consumer Affairs, so how these boards evolved has much to do with which ministries they were placed under,' explains McCann. 'As you can imagine the board within the Department of Justice evolved along the lines of enforcement, law and monitoring, whereas in Culture there was more of a tendency to be less intrusive and to respect artistic freedom. So what we have now is the most interesting mishmash of different approaches. Of



Ken Park (Produced by Kees Kasander and Jean Louis Piel, Director Larry Clark)
courtesy of the Sydney Film Festival

course, with current technology, we have advanced to the stage where it's redundant to have six boards'.

McCann says with the variety of film materials now available through computers, video games, DVDs, the internet and satellite transmission, the power held by government to regulate has become even more difficult. 'It doesn't matter what country you're in, you are now scrambling to try and make the service that you provide relevant to the people who use it,' she says. 'That has made us start examining what it is we do, whose needs we're meeting and in what ways we can improve our service.'

According to McCann, Canadian research has revealed that, despite the abundance of information, very few people are paying attention to classification labels. 'The statistics of the number of parents who actually consult classification information prior to making a decision to rent a video or take a child to a movie are alarming us,' she says. 'What these children are telling us about what they're seeing and what they have access to with their parents' permission would make the small hairs on the back of your neck stand up. Parents will get in line to be the first to buy these really violent video games for their children. These products are all labelled as not appropriate for children but this information is being ignored because nobody is teaching parents the skills for media management.'

McCann says the effort they're undertaking in Canada at the moment is looking at providing better film content information as opposed to more laws and more labels, which they are learning are less effective than educational interventions.

'We may be aiming towards self-regulation simply because the technology is everywhere,' she says. 'If you teach children critical viewing skills and critical consuming skills, then you don't have to worry about the need for armies of censors. What you need are in fact armies of teachers who, as new media come out, are teaching strategies about how to cope with this stuff. We are all trying to address the problems of convergence. We need to reinvent ourselves and to make sure that what it is we do in terms of service is actually meeting the needs of consumers of film products.'


While the issue of film censorship and converging media is running hot in Australia and Canada, on the other side of the globe things are less heated. Erik Wallander, Deputy Director of the Sweden National Board of Film Classification, has worked in film regulation for the past 15 years. He says there is currently very little discussion of the topic in Sweden. 'There hasn't been

a discussion about film censorship for a few years now,' says Wallander. 'At this time it seems people in Sweden care very little about what we are doing.'

As he points out, the reason for this could well be that the classification system in Sweden is already more liberal than that of Australia. In Sweden today, for audiences over the age of 15 the only scenes that may be banned are such where the events are depicted in such a manner as to have a brutalising effect. Only films containing explicit scenes of severe violence to people or animals or depicting sexual violence or presenting children in pornographic situations may be banned.

'We are not as afraid of the screen as we were when our body was founded in 1911,' says Wallander. When the first films were shown in Sweden it was the local police in charge of examining the content of films, and as might be expected their decisions often came into conflict with public opinion. 'We don't work with criteria in the same way as many other countries do. We don't count kicks or swear words or sex scenes and so on. Our law simply states that we are not allowed to pass a film for children if it may cause psychological damage.'

Wallander notes that Sweden's constitution forbids the government from infringing on freedom of speech. 'Censorship is not a very popular thing amongst politicians. Too many people [are] against censorship and would not agree on stricter laws.' He also says he would be very surprised if converging media would do anything to impact on the current classification system in Sweden. 'I think what has happened in Sweden for the last decade is that nobody really wants to touch this question because it would create a lot of trouble in a situation where very little can change.'

Des Clark says the world will see many more rapid and exciting changes in how and what we view and there is a long journey ahead in identifying and meeting the challenges that converging media will present. 'I think the system that we have - the new combined guidelines for film and computer games - is a good working example of guidelines that can apply across a range of media,' he says. 'And I think if a community has a debate about this matter at a time when government are looking to produce a scheme or deal with an existing scheme, and we have people in the country who are well informed, we can make a positive contribution to the debate of how we shape our classification and censorship system into the future'. 

With thanks to Jenny Neighbour.