



Office of Film and Literature Classification



Public Perceptions of a
Violent Video Game
X-Men Origins: Wolverine

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PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF A VIOLENT VIDEO GAME – *X-MEN ORIGINS: WOLVERINE*

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1. Executive Summary

Introduction

The Classification Office commissioned market research company UMR to recruit members of the public aged 18 and over to participate in two focus groups held at the Office of Film and Literature Classification premises in Wellington in late May 2009. One group comprised 12 people who played action video games and the other group was made up of 12 non-game-players. Both groups contained a mix of ages, males and females, and parents and non-parents.

Literature that informed the Office's video game research and methodological approach included previous Perception Analyser¹ research conducted for the Office by UMR, the Office's surveys of young peoples' use of entertainment mediums and games, and overseas- and New Zealand-based studies of game-players' attitudes and game effects literature.

The video game chosen for this research was *X-Men Origins: Wolverine*, classified 'R18 contains violence' by the Office in June 2009. The game is based on a comic book character now better known as part of the big-budget X-Men movie franchise. Wolverine is a mutant man who has claws that extend from his hands, and incredible powers of strength and recovery from injury. Wolverine generally kills using his long metal claw hands or by jumping on people, but sometimes he uses guns. His attacks result in spectacular effects including arcs of spurting blood, writhing bodies, dismemberment, impaled bodies and viscera.

Perception Analyser – Main Findings

Participants were shown two clips of game play. They registered mild levels of discomfort with the first clip until a full motion video (FMV) sequence showed Wolverine lifting a helicopter pilot into propeller blades, beheading him. On average, this sequence registered five out of ten compared with three out of ten for the rest of the clip. Parents tended to be more uncomfortable with the clip than non-parents, and those with children aged 13-17 years more so than parents of children of other ages.

When watching the second clip, participants registered higher levels of discomfort overall, but females more so than males. However, there was little difference between parent and non-parent comfort levels for Clip 2.

Initially, when asked to assign a classification to the game, six of the 24 participants assigned it a classification of R16 and 14 assigned it R18. Participants later revised their ratings after discussion about the application of classification law to ten assigning R16 and nine assigning R18². Fifty percent indicated the game would be an appropriate present for an 18-year-old niece or nephew. Thirty-three percent thought it would be appropriate for a 16-year-old but no one thought it would be a suitable present for a 10 to 13-year-old.

¹ Perception Analyser – better known as the 'worm' from televised political debates. Participants are given an individual handset and instructed to turn the dial up and down as they view research material. This results in a graph that illustrates the responses of participants, which can then be analysed collectively or by demographics.

² Participants were not told in advance that *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* had been classified R18 Contains violence.

Discussion – Main Findings

Following the Perception Analyser session, the Chief Censor explained the criteria in the Films, Videos, and Publications Classification Act 1993 and conducted a discussion with participants about what they had encountered viewing the clips.

All participants expressed discomfort with the idea of young people playing violent video games such as the one just viewed. Some raised concerns about the increasing tolerance for violence in today's society, both in the media and in the way people interact with one another. When asked whether they thought that there was a causal link between violence in video games and violent behaviour in society, participants expressed a range of opinions. Some felt there was a clear link between what people see in games and what they do, while others felt that games may be one of many factors that contribute to aggressive behaviour. In contrast, others felt there was no link between games and behaviour, and that responsibility lay with individuals to be accountable for their actions.

Both of the clips viewed involved many enemies attacking the player's character Wolverine, who employed his superhuman abilities to survive. For some participants, the game was clearly fantasy and the violence part of the narrative rather than gratuitous. During the discussion, participants contrasted this game with others where the sole aim is to commit violent acts and kill people in callous and horrific ways (the example of *Manhunt* was cited). In general, participants expressed a higher level of discomfort with what they considered to be gratuitous or unnecessary violence in games.

Advances in video game technology were identified as a concern in relation to the increasing degree of realistic violence being depicted. It was argued that as computer animation became increasingly realistic, it was more difficult for audiences to distinguish between fantasy and reality. Consequently, some participants felt that this would lead to a blurring of what was appropriate or expected in video games but not in reality. This point was raised in conjunction with a potential injury to the public good identified by participants – mimicking of violent behaviours observed in video games.

While some participants agreed that boys were more likely to exhibit aggressive behaviour in response to violent video games, some felt that there would be no difference between likely responses from young boys or girls, citing examples of both genders imitating things they had seen in games or in films. The majority agreed that, whatever the gender, younger game-players were more likely to be influenced by content in video games than older game-players.

The perceived impressionable nature of young people also led participants to identify phobias and nightmares as potential injuries that could result from exposure to violent games of the calibre of *X Men Origins: Wolverine*.

Participants felt that desensitisation to violence could occur because of the repetitive nature of the game play. Members of the non-game-playing group described the game as so repetitive that it became 'boring' and 'mindless'. Participants also noted the lack of consequences for the game-player as Wolverine committed acts of violence within the game.

The issues of desensitisation and repetition raised questions about the unique aspects of the medium of video games where the player, to varying degrees, has control of the action that takes place. This was recognised by participants as being different from mediums such as film or television where the relationship between the viewer and what is depicted is less interactive.

The clips screened to participants involved a mixture of player-instigated game play as well as full motion video (FMV) sequences in which Wolverine interacted with his surroundings and with enemies in a pre-determined way that the player had no control over. While some of the participants agreed with the point that game-players could, to a degree, limit the level of violence that Wolverine participated in, the presence of violence in these FMV sequences made many feel uncomfortable.

While the majority thought that *X Men Origins: Wolverine* should be age-restricted, with 79% assigning it a classification of R16 or R18, many felt that such classifications may not stop young people from gaining access to it. Parental responsibility was raised as an issue, with participants feeling that many parents were likely to allow their children access to restricted games either through ignorance of the meaning of the classification, ignorance of the content of the game, or disregard for the censorship system. Participants also suggested that the fact that the object in question was a video game, rather than a film, meant that parents were less likely to be aware of what their children were seeing.

Participants indicated that there was a need for increased parental awareness of what was in video games, at whom they were targeted, and what the classifications meant. They acknowledged that many young people would probably like to play games they were not legally allowed to, and felt that many parents did not know enough about what their children were accessing through video games, the internet, or television, whether at home or at friends' houses. For this reason, they felt there was a need for a censorship system in relation to video games.

Conclusion

This study confirmed that people who play games, and to a lesser extent people who don't, are concerned that the public good can be injured by exposing young people to video games. It confirms a perception that injury arises not only from a game's violent content, but also from two characteristics inherent in the nature of the medium conveying that content, namely interactivity and repetition over time. For the Office, this study also confirms its emphasis on 'the impact of the medium' in s3(4) in its application of the Films, Videos, and Publications Classification Act 1993 to violent video games submitted for classification.

On the other hand, the study shows the extent to which the participants' discourse around video games has been shaped by popular media, which in turn is based on or influenced by media effects theory. Little mention was made of the many ways young people and adults interact with games or of the variety of often critical ways they negotiate the messages of games. This indicates that further research needs to explore the extent to which the public's perception of causal links between game playing and various social ills is moderated or even undermined by how players actually respond to and negotiate their way through the content and characteristics of the medium conveying the content.

2. Background

The subject of violent content in video games, and the degree to which it influences young people, is a hotly debated topic, both in academic and public forums. The Office of Film and Literature Classification examines and assigns classifications to video games using the criteria set out in the Films, Videos, and Publications Classification Act 1993 to determine:

- if the publication is objectionable because it describes, depicts, expresses, or otherwise deals with matters such as sex, horror, crime, cruelty, or violence in such a manner that the availability of the publication is likely to be injurious to the public good (s3(1))
- if the publication promotes or supports or tends to promote or support...acts of torture or the infliction of extreme violence or extreme cruelty (s3(2)(f))
- the extent and degree to which, and manner in which, acts of torture, the infliction of serious physical harm, or acts of significant cruelty are depicted (s3(3)(a)(i)).

Finally, the Office considers the dominant effect of the publication as a whole, the impact of the medium, any merit the publication may have, the persons, classes of persons or age groups to whom the publication is intended or is likely to be made available, and the purpose for which the publication is intended to be used (s3(4)).

3. Methodology

Market research company UMR recruited two groups of members of the public aged 18 and over to participate. One group comprised 12 people who played action video games, while the other group was made up of 12 non-game-players. Both groups contained a mix of ages, males and females, and parents and non-parents (see 11. Demographic Summary).

Two reports are offered of the research activities involved. One is a report of Perception Analyser-based research conducted by UMR. The UMR report is summarised here and also available on-line as a PDF of a Powerpoint presentation at <http://www.censorship.govt.nz/censorship-research.html>. The second part of the research, reported here in full, involved participants writing down their thoughts on what they had viewed, followed by a discussion led by the Chief Censor during which the Films, Videos and Publications Classification Act 1993 was explained and its relation to *Wolverine* explored. The entire research was conducted on one evening in May 2009 at the Office of Film and Literature Classification premises in Wellington.

4. Previous Relevant Classification Office Research

This research draws on methodology and themes present in other research conducted both within the Office and externally. Similar methodology has been used previously by the Office for its 2007 research *Public Perceptions of Highly Offensive Language*. The use of the Perception Analyser (PA) captures real-time reactions from participants as they watch clips. In this instance, the information sought through the use of the PA was the level of comfort the participants had viewing the clips, namely the depictions of violent activity in the video game *Wolverine*.

The Office's previous research into video games, *Underage Gaming Research* (2005), surveyed 331 15-18-year-old high school students' use of 26 video games, 24 of which were R18 and two of which were banned. The key findings of this research included:

- 62% of the students indicated that they had played at least one of the 26 games.
- Males were considerably more likely to have played the games than females.

- 43% of those who owned at least one of the 26 games said they had generally bought such games for themselves. A further 35% said that their parents usually bought the games, while 12% got one of their siblings to buy them.
- Three quarters of those who had played at least one of the games claimed that their parents knew which games they played.
- 76% felt that the age restrictions made no difference to whether they would play the game or not.

The Office's *Young People's Use of Entertainment Mediums* (2006) investigated the use of entertainment mediums by 460 15-17-year-olds to find out what influenced their viewing and playing decisions, and how users were affected by what they viewed and played. Key findings of this research included:

- 38% of respondents played computer and console games at least once a week.
- 19% never played computer or console games.
- Only a small proportion of those younger than 18 years of age reported viewing or playing a movie, game, DVD or video that was classified as R18.
- Recommendations of friends were easily the most commonly mentioned influence over which games were played. 44% rated this 7 or higher (10=most influence, 0=no influence), compared with 21% for TV advertising and 20% for reviews.

These reports illustrate that video games feature prominently in the lives of New Zealand teenagers, and that a number of teens are accessing games which have restrictions higher than their age. The current research examined parents' and non-parents' views on the suitability of games such as *Wolverine* for children and young people.

5. Relevant External Research on Public Perceptions of Video Games

There is a lot of literature in the area of video games, notably the effect (or lack thereof) of video games on people's attitudes and behaviours.

In 2007 the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) published a research report³ which sought to 'improve understanding of what players enjoy about video games, and to explain their preferences for particular games'. Amongst the key research objectives of this study was the question 'what do gamers say about violence as an element in the appeal of games?' (p.3). Another objective of the research was to solidify the BBFC's understanding of 'how games are perceived by the public in general and by parents of gamers in particular' (p.4). These two points of interest were repeated in the Office's research.

Key themes in the BBFC research relevant to this study include the idea of video games as a source of escapism from everyday life, and a safe, structured environment in which the experiences and outcomes are pre-determined and known (p.9). Video games can also serve as facilitators, enabling players to participate in activities which they would not or could not do in real life, offering 'adventure without risk' and at times providing a different reality which allows players to develop and participate in communities which are vastly different to 'real world' ones.

The BBFC research highlights that a key appeal of video games to gamers is that they often involve competition, overcoming challenges, and negotiating obstacles to progress through the game, resulting in

³ Cragg, A., Taylor, C., Toombs, B. (2007) *Video Games: Research to improve understanding of what players enjoy about video games, and to explain their preferences for particular games*. London: British Board of Film Classification.

a sense of achievement for the player (pp.9-10). This sense of competition sits, in some games, alongside co-operative participation, with many online games allowing gamers to play together, resulting in socialisation in contrast to the feeling held by many parents that video games are antisocial.

In relation to violence as an element of appeal in video games, the BBFC found that some gamers do enjoy the violent content in games, appreciating the realism of action and resulting injuries both in terms of the quality of the depictions but also in relation to the knowledge that they are responsible for what is happening on the screen (p.11). The research makes the following key points about the relationship between the player and violent content in a video game:

- Violence is often the game's built-in means of removing obstacles, allowing the player to progress through the game.
 - Violence also creates a sense of tension in the game as not only can the player injure and kill opponents, those characters can in turn injure or kill the player's character. As a result, players generally focus on keeping their own characters alive rather than putting their character at unnecessary risk simply in order to participate in in-game violence.
 - Video games provide the opportunity to participate in violence without real-world consequences.
 - Gamers seem not to lose awareness that they are playing a game and do not mistake the game for real life.
- (pp.11-12)

The research noted that some young gamers find the violent content in games upsetting, some having nightmares after playing violent games. They also felt uncomfortable at times with 'wickedness prevailing over innocence' and were more comfortable shooting an enemy from a distance than stabbing someone up close (p.12). Adult gamers also experienced this discomfort and expressed concern at where the advances in technology might take violence in video games. Overall, however, gamers in the BBFC study felt that the violence on television and in films was more upsetting than the violence in games.

The majority of game-players who participated in the BBFC research rejected the idea that video game violence led to violence in real life. However, some felt violence in video games could make some players more aggressive if played excessively, or if those players were predisposed to violent and aggressive behaviours (p.13).

In consulting parents, the BBFC found that game-playing parents were more informed, and less concerned, about the content of the video games played by their children. While they also felt that games were only likely to negatively affect those with a 'pre-existing propensity to be violent', some noted that their children at times imitated language and actions observed in games (p.14). Experiences of parents in relation to enforcing the classifications on games were similar in both the BBFC and the OFLC studies – many parents found that despite forbidding the playing of restricted games in their own homes, children were accessing the games through other means such as friends' houses, older siblings, and other relatives (including 'the other parent' in a divorced family).

Research by Ferguson (2007)⁴ involves 'a meta-analytic review of studies that examine the impact of violent video games on both aggressive behaviour and visuospatial cognition in order to understand the full impact of [violent] video games'. Ferguson highlights the political and media concern over a perceived link between playing video games and committing violent acts, such as school shootings. In order to assist

⁴ Ferguson, C. J. (2007). The good, the bad and the ugly: a meta-analytic review of positive and negative effects of violent video games. *Psychiatric Quarterly* 78 (4): 309-316

the ongoing debates about the existence or strength of a link between games and crime, Ferguson's aim in this article was to examine both the positive and negative impacts of games. His results support a link between games and 'visuospatial cognition', but no link between violent video games and aggressive behaviour. He suggests that there is support in the literature for the argument that people who are pre-disposed to aggressive behaviours may respond negatively to violent video games, however the same is not to be said for the majority of the population. Ferguson suggests that more emphasis should be placed on the potential positive effects of violent video games.

Schott's 2009 study⁵ sought to explore the views of young people about violent video games. Schott argues that young people's opinions are generally overlooked or ignored by research into video games, yet they are the group identified as both the most prolific user of these games and also the group most affected by their regulation. He also cites the work of researchers who argue that legislators, advocacy groups and news media construct young game-players as 'uncritical and non-resistant' who 'once exposed to video game violence, develop aggressive thoughts, feelings and behaviours'. As a result of this assumed effect, young game-players who take pleasure and enjoyment from violent video games are often stigmatised and condemned by other groups in society.

Schott highlights the arguments articulated by participants in his research – gamers are not a homogenous group. People play different sorts of games and interact with them in a variety of ways. In contrast to dominant discourse surrounding gamers and their games, Schott argues that young people are not simply passive audiences – instead they participate actively with video games, and to varying degrees are critical of and negotiate the messages of games and the broader gaming community. His participants point out that there is also not just one type of game – different narratives, motivations, challenges and reactions are evoked by the multitude of video games played by young people. War games were identified as a key genre where participants felt 'killing' of enemies was less morally dubious given the narrative of conflict, as opposed to other sorts of games where killing was presented as gratuitous and did not serve to progress the game. Schott refers to the work of other researchers who describe this sort of violence as 'carnavalesque death', which highlights 'the bloody, the gory and the grotesque'.

Schott suggests that traditional research in this area tends to look only at the negative aspects of games, overlooking the content of these games and the potential for productive social activity within the gaming community. In his research he explores the debates between games as instigators of aggression in youth and the cultural value of video games.

Schott cites the work of Buckingham and Bragg (2004) who suggest that society has become accustomed to condemning video games as the cause for any social disobedience exhibited by young people. Schott's research aimed to critique this link between video games and violence in society by investigating how young game-players viewed their experiences with violent video games; in particular, how they framed and discussed what games are. 'Violent' has become one of the dominant adjectives connected to video games, and Schott explores the way game discourses are used by young people in contrast to traditional research. He suggests that while they may be using the same words to discuss their experiences of games ('kill', 'shoot'), these words may have different definitions and associations for game-players to critics of gaming culture. Schott refers to the 2003 work by Juul regarding the degree of control game-players have over what they can do within the confines of the game itself. Schott points out that games provide 'context and meaning for the actions that players engage with'.

⁵ Schott, G. (2009). *Language-GAME-Players: Articulating the pleasures of 'violent' game texts*. Waikato: University of Waikato, New Zealand, Department of Screen and Media.

In relation to violence in video games, some participants in Schott's study differentiated between 'violence' and 'cruelty' in games. Enemies in video games were more often seen by participants as obstacles to overcome in order to progress through the game, rather than as characters to exact revenge or inflict pain upon. In addition, a key imperative was keeping the player's character alive, with economical use of resources such as ammunition and health packs, rather than dwelling on committing acts of violence or brutality in the game.

Findings

6. Description of the Game

The game *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* is based on a comic book character now better known as part of the big-budget X-Men movie franchise. Wolverine is a mutant man who has claws that extend from his hands, and incredible powers of strength and recovery from injury.

The player controls Wolverine as he moves through different environments with varying objectives. The opening levels involve Wolverine moving through an African jungle, taking down everyone in his path. Full motion video (FMV) sequences provide flashbacks and clues to the overarching story of the game, which concerns the title character's quest for vengeance. The game-play is linear, with the environment clearly guiding the player to perform certain tasks. Extra skills and abilities are unlocked as the player progresses.

Wolverine generally kills using his long metal claws or by jumping on people, but in some sequences he uses guns. These attacks result in spectacular effects including arcs of spurting blood, writhing bodies, dismemberment, impaled bodies and viscera. Though generally captured from a distance, sometimes the action slows down. FMV components, in particular, depict violence from a closer perspective.

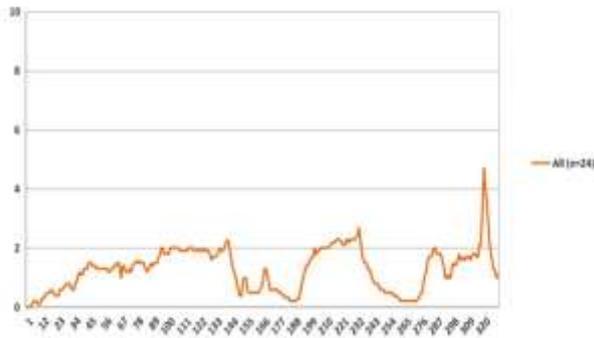
7. Summary of Perception Analyser Results

Participants were shown an introductory sequence from the game in order to become familiar with using the Perception Analyser. Following this, two clips, both of approximately five minutes, were screened. Participants were asked to use the Perception Analyser to indicate their levels of comfort with what they were viewing on screen (where 0 = comfortable, 10 = highly uncomfortable). They were asked to indicate their thoughts on the suitability of the game as a present for a niece or nephew, and to assign a classification to the game. Full results are available in PDF form on-line at <http://www.censorship.govt.nz/censorship-research.html>.

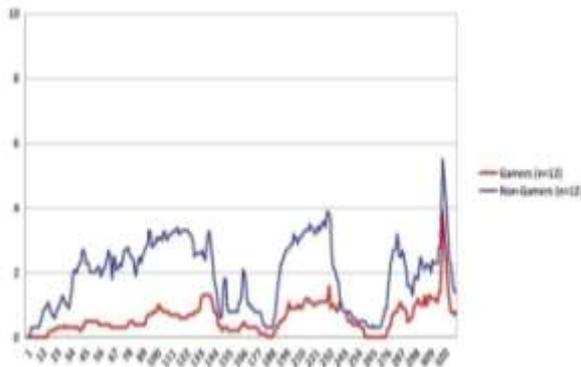
7.1 Clip 1

The first clip ran for five and a half minutes. It began with Wolverine falling through the air into a jungle setting and landing on an enemy soldier, squashing him into the ground. Wolverine is attacked by a number of soldiers wielding machetes. He attacks and kills them, slashing at them with the blades which protrude from his hands. As Wolverine gets injured, he must avoid being hit by his enemies while his health regenerates. At one point during this fight Wolverine throws one of the soldiers off the edge of a cliff; at another point he dives through the air into an enemy, with the attack shown in slow motion. After Wolverine defeats this group of soldiers, he moves through the jungle and encounters three more groups

of enemies that he dispatches. The climax of the scene involves Wolverine leaping onto the front of a helicopter. The player is prompted to push a particular button to make Wolverine punch and smash the windscreen of the cockpit. Once Wolverine has broken the windscreen, an FMV sequence begins (which the player does not control) in which Wolverine lifts the pilot up into the blades of the helicopter, decapitating him, spraying purple blood, not red.

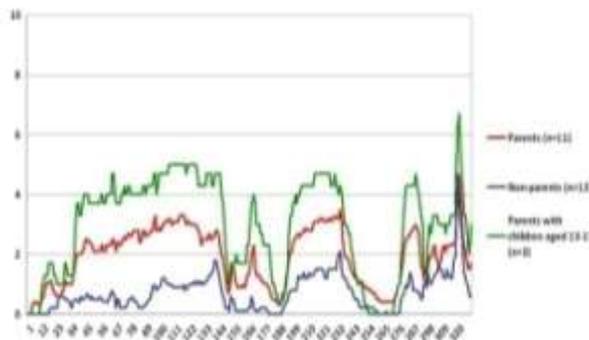


On the first viewing of this clip, participants were asked to imagine that they were playing the game. Overall, participants registered mild levels of discomfort with what they were viewing. The exception was when Wolverine broke through the helicopter's windscreen, and pulled the pilot out of the cockpit. At this point, an FMV sequence showed Wolverine lifting the pilot into the propeller blades, beheading him. On average, this sequence registered five out of ten compared to the rest of the clip, which registered three out of ten. Slow motion kills/deaths were other points at which the level of discomfort increased, though not as high as for the helicopter sequence.



Responses from game-players and non-game-players were similar in terms of the points they found uncomfortable and those that didn't concern them. Non-gamers were consistently more uncomfortable (most of the time sitting above two, while gamers were below two most of the time). Both groups found the beheading the most uncomfortable part of the clip, with gamers rating it nearly four out of ten, and non-gamers giving a rating of nearly six.

There was no notable difference between responses from male and female participants, with females registering only a slightly higher level of discomfort than males.



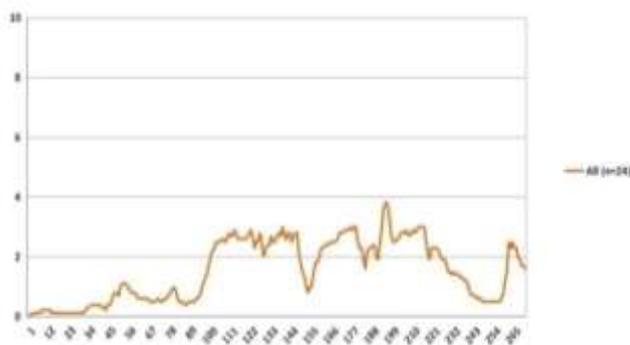
Parents tended to be more uncomfortable with the clip than non-parents. The three parents of children aged 13-17 years old were even more uncomfortable than parents of children of other ages. Again, the points at which participants were uncomfortable were similar between the three demographic groups, the only difference being the level of discomfort registered.

Participants were then shown Clip 1 for a second time, and asked to indicate how comfortable they would be with a 13-15-year-old playing the game. All participants indicated they were significantly more uncomfortable with this than when they put themselves in the role of the game-player. The gap between game-players and non-game-players was less here, though non-game-players continued to show a higher level of discomfort than game-players. When

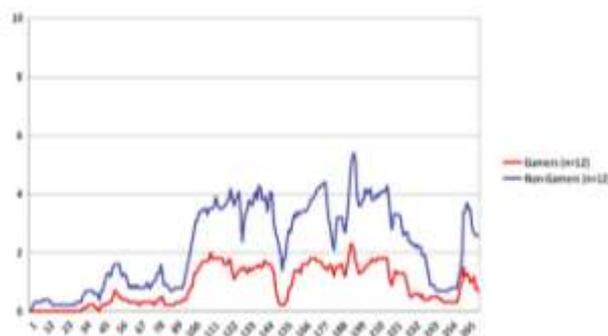
taking into account the parental status of participants, the three parents of 13-17-year-olds were significantly more uncomfortable with the idea of a 13-15-year-olds playing this game than parents of children of other ages, or non-parents.

7.2 Clip 2

The second clip participants were asked to consider ran for four and a half minutes. It began with an FMV sequence showing the man Logan becoming Wolverine. This sequence lasted approximately one and a half minutes and included flashbacks to the character's earlier encounters with enemies. As Wolverine lies in a tank of liquid, tubes entering numerous points on his body, he is filled with metal alloy adamantium. He starts to struggle, and bursts out of the tank, roaring and thrashing. Game play starts as Wolverine realises he is in a laboratory, and enemy soldiers attempt to subdue him. Wolverine attacks the enemies, at times in slow motion, with stabbing actions and blood spray clearly visible. After killing all the men in the room, Wolverine moves along a corridor and encounters a second group. During this fight, a heartbeat noise is heard indicating that Wolverine's health levels are low. By avoiding his enemies for a brief time, Wolverine's health and body regenerates to a degree, and he continues to fight. Wolverine picks up an enemy and repeatedly stabs him in slow motion. This slow motion attack is repeated at the end of the clip when Wolverine encounters a third group of enemies.



When watching this clip from the perspective of being the game-player, participants indicated a higher level of discomfort than with Clip 1. For almost half the duration of this clip, participants (on average) registered their level of discomfort as sitting between two and four out of ten (with ten= highly uncomfortable), compared to Clip 1, where responses were below two out of ten for the majority of the clip.

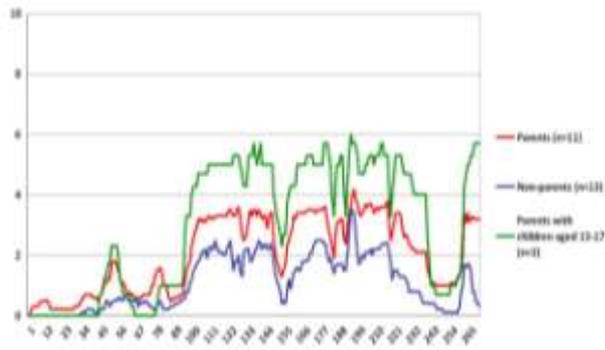


When comparing the responses of game-players and non-game-players to Clip 2, the result was similar to Clip 1. The trajectories of both groups were similar in terms of the peaks and troughs throughout the clip, with non-gamers indicating a higher level of discomfort throughout the clip than game-players. While this clip did not have a single point of action which registered as highly for participants as Clip 1's helicopter sequence, both groups registered higher levels of

discomfort during a sequence where Wolverine lifted an enemy and repeatedly stabbed his extended claws up and through the body, resulting in a slow motion spray of blood.

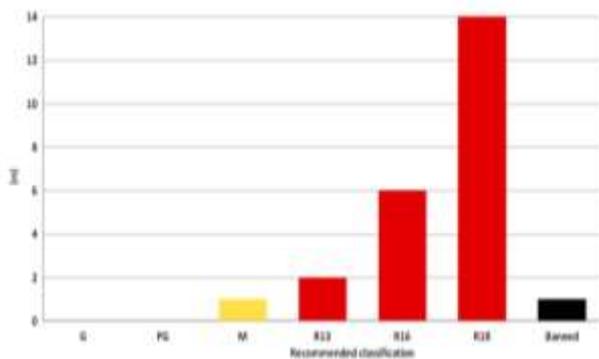
During this clip, the female participants were more uncomfortable than the males (registering levels over two for most of the clip, compared to males registering under two).

As with Clip 1, parents were less comfortable with what they were viewing than non-parents. The three parents of 13-17-year-olds again indicated higher levels of discomfort, registering around half of the clip as four to six out of ten, compared to parents of children of other ages (two to four out of ten) and non-parents (zero to two out of ten).



Clip 2 was screened a second time, with participants asked to indicate their levels of comfort with the idea of 13-15-year-olds playing the game. The Perception Analyser results showed that participants were less comfortable with the game in this context than they were when imagining themselves as the player. Non-gamers were more pronounced in their discomfort than game-players, registering levels of discomfort as high as seven during this clip when thinking about 13-15-year-olds playing it (compared to a high of five from game-players). Interestingly, there was little difference between parents and non-parents in terms of their levels of comfort on this viewing of the clip – when analysed in terms of these demographics, the Perception Analyser graphs revealed almost identical lines for both groups.

7.3 Classifications Assigned at the Conclusion of the Perception Analyser Exercise



When asked to assign a classification to the game based on the clips, 14 of the 24 participants assigned the game a classification of R18 and six assigned R16.

Fifty percent indicated that they thought this game would be an appropriate present to give to an 18-year-old niece or nephew. Thirty-three percent thought it appropriate for a 16-year-old, while no participants thought it an appropriate present for a 13 or 10-year-old.

8. Analysis of Questionnaires

Following the Perception Analyser exercise, participants were asked to write down their responses to some questions about what they had just seen and heard on the screen. The questions were:

- How do you feel about the clips you have just viewed?
- How do you feel about people aged 16-17 playing this game?
- How do you feel about people aged 12-15 playing this game?
- Any other thoughts?

Participants indicated a variety of feelings about the clips they had viewed. Some were comfortable with what they had viewed, feeling that the game looked interesting and typical of an action game with quite a bit of violence. Others were disturbed by what they had seen, indicating that the violence was gratuitous and the game repetitive and boring.

The violence was a bit much, but most games of that calibre have about the same level, so I don't think it's any more or less violent.

Male, Pakeha, 35-44, Game-playing group

I personally feel comfortable with the clips I have viewed. Very repetitive. Lots of physical violence/blood.

Male, Pakeha, 25-34, Game-playing group

Very intense and sustained violence.

Male, Pakeha, 25-34, Non-game-playing group

Too much blood. Sound effects a bit much. Some 'deaths' a bit graphic – probably the chopper and 'overkills'.

Female, Pakeha, 35-44, Game-playing group

Boring, repetitive, a bit gory for my tastes but it's just a game. Personally did not like the decapitation by chopper, but it was certainly dramatic. I would not buy the game and would expect it to appeal to teenage boys.

Female, Other ethnic group, 45-54, Parent, Game-playing group

Disappointed and surprised – at what we seem to have to resort to to entertain ourselves, and at the level of violence throughout the game.

Female, Pakeha, 25-34, Non-game-playing group

Sixteen of the twenty-four participants were uncomfortable with the idea of 16-17-year-olds playing *X-Men Origins: Wolverine*. Non-game-players were more uncomfortable than game-players, and women were more uncomfortable than men, with more women indicating that they would not be happy with people of this age playing the game.

Kids are more expectant of realism in games and in film, and are becoming more acceptant and expectant of graphic violence. The degree of violence shown in these clips that is ancillary to game action makes me feel 'slightly' uncomfortable exposing 16-17-year-olds to this game.

Male, Pakeha, 45-54, Parent of child aged 13-17, Game-players group

16-17-year-olds I think will probably be mature enough to cope with the violence, but it is not something that I am really in favour of.

Female, Pakeha, 25-34, Non-game-playing group

Fine as it is obviously fantasy based. Fight scenes and violence in context of war. This age group would be more able to distinguish the fantasy aspect rather than reality based.

Male, Pakeha, 25-34, Game-players group

I wouldn't feel happy for this age group to play this game.

Female, Māori, 25-34, Parent of child aged 13-17, Non-game-playing group

Participants were significantly more uncomfortable with the idea of 12-15-year-olds playing this game, with all participants saying they did not think it okay for people of this age to play the game – a few participants commented that they did not think young people should even know games like this existed and would go to the extent of hiding the game should it come into their house.

I believe this age group is too young. This age group is easily influenced.

Male, Pakeha, 25-34, Game-playing group

I suspect they're the target market. I wouldn't give it as a present, even if it was requested, but apart from a fair bit of gruesome and being a continuous death-fest, my main concern is just how repetitive and limited it seems to be.

Female, Other ethnic group, 45-54, Parent, Game-playing group

I don't think that kids this age should be playing the game. Will they understand what this does to them and why they feel a certain way? Most adults would struggle doing that.

Male, Pakeha, 25-34, Non-game-playing group

Not good. Young people get desensitised to the violence, think it's normal and may lead to bad ideas and some people acting on the ideas. Young people are very impressionable.

Female, Pakeha, 18-24, Non-game-playing group

Other thoughts about what they had observed indicated the themes and content of the discussion that took place following this exercise:

I would be worried that this amount of violence would be desensitising young people to violence.

Female, Pakeha, 55+, Parent, Game-playing group

I can understand why some might want to play this game, through the sense of power it brings. However, violence breeds more violence.

Male, Pakeha, 25-34, Non-game-playing group

I don't see how anyone would find enjoyment in this.

Female, Māori, 25-34, Parent of child aged 13-17, Non-game-playing group

9. Analysis of Discussion

The Chief Censor explained the relevant classification criteria set out in the Films, Videos, and Publications Classification Act 1993, followed by a group discussion.

As reflected in the Perception Analyser exercise, all participants were uncomfortable with the idea of young people playing violent video games such as the one they had viewed. Some raised concerns about the increasing tolerance for violence in today's society, both in the media and in the way people interact with one another. When asked whether they thought there was a causal link between violence in video games and violent behaviour in society, participants expressed a range of opinions. Some felt that there was a clear link between what people saw in games and what they did, while others felt that games may be one of many factors that contributed to aggressive behaviour.

I think there's always going to be a causal link between what people see and what they take in, and what they start to believe is actually reality.

Female, Māori, 35-44, Game-players group

Most killers, especially if you look at the ones in the American schools, have said that they've watched violent movies and played violent games.

Female, Pakeha, 55+, Parent, Game-players group

I don't believe it takes only one game for people to become like that. There is a whole pile of conditioning. You watch enough of the news; you're going to start believing that some of those things are actually okay to do.

Female, Māori, 35-44, Game-players group

But I still think it's down to family violence as well. I mean, I used to play violent games when I was seven or eight, but I still know what's right and wrong. It's based on upbringing.

Male, Pakeha, 25-34, Game-players group

There are a lot of different factors, aren't there, like someone who sits and plays for hours, whereas I know kids who'll play for half an hour then they'll go outside and do something else, and it really hasn't affected them. And it depends on parent's value systems, the child's maturity – the way their brain's wired.

Female, Pakeha, 55+, Parent, Non-game-playing group

In contrast, some participants felt that there was no link between games and behaviour.

But if you take a random sample of 18-year-old boys, how many of them are going to play video games and watch violent movies.

Male, Pakeha, 25-34, Game-players group

It's a fantasy, and I don't personally agree with what anyone else is saying. I don't think people do become morally reprobate because they play a game like this ... I don't think people pick up moral values from games, I think they pick them up from society.

Female, Other ethnic group, 45-54, Parent, Game-players group

But you know, moral values are laid down a lot earlier in life really ... It's where you have children being neglected, they have no sense of right and wrong, their world is constant chaos, you know that's what breed a sociopathic type, not playing a video game.

Female, Other ethnic group, 45-54, Parent, Game-players group

By the same argument you could say that 'Loony Tunes', over the years, exposing everybody to 'Loony Tunes' should mean that we all love going out clubbing bunnies, which I don't. So there's a whole lot of other stuff that goes around it.

Male, Pakeha, 25-34, Game-players group

One participants expressed the feeling that responsibility lay with the individual to be accountable for his or her actions.

It's just a cop out, just saying, 'it's because of the game, it's not my fault'. It's the same with guys saying, 'I did it because of religion'. It's just a cop out, it's the excuse, 'it's not my fault, it's the game's fault', when really it is their fault. They choose to do it.

Male, Asian, 25-34, Game-players group

In relation to links, if any, between violent video games and violence in society, participants raised realism in games as a key factor in the degree to which people would or could be influenced by what they saw on the screen while playing a video game. As found in previous Office research (*Public Perceptions of Highly Offensive Language* (2007) and *Viewing Violence* (2008)), context was an important factor in the level of comfort participants had with violence in video games. In the case of *X Men Origins: Wolverine*, the game footage shown to participants involved a fight in a jungle and then in a laboratory research centre. Both clips involved many enemies attacking the player's character, and Wolverine employing his superhuman abilities to survive. For some participants, this game was clearly fantasy and the violence part of the narrative rather than gratuitous. During the discussion this was contrasted with other games where the sole aim is to commit violent acts and kill people in callous and horrific ways (the example of *Manhunt* was cited). Participants expressed a higher level of discomfort with what they considered to be gratuitous or unnecessary violence in games.

It was a fantasy game, but it was a whole lot of mindless, senseless violence. It was put in there and didn't really add any value, but desensitised the actual impact of the game. Let's just get some machetes, and start doing that sort of thing, and we'll see how that goes.

Male, Pakeha, 35-44, Parent, Non-game-playing group

Advances in video game technology were also identified as a concern for some participants in relation to the increased degree of realistic violence being depicted. It was argued that as computer animation became increasingly realistic, it became more difficult for audiences to distinguish between fantasy and reality.

The more real it becomes, the closer things are to us being humans, ie yes I'm going to go out and slice the bunny up because what's his name, the pig, decides that bunnies are no good – that was so unreal that people couldn't make that correlation back to human behaviour. Things are now getting closer to human behaviour.

Female, Māori, 35-44, Game-players group

Consequently, some participants felt this confusion could lead to a blurring of what was appropriate or expected in video games but not in reality. This point was raised in conjunction with a potential injury to the public good identified by participants – mimicking of violent behaviours observed in video games.

How many kids act out WWF, and how many kids try things, and think, 'oh I can fly and therefore I will jump off this shed'.

Female, Māori, 35-44, Game-players group

Mimicking behaviour was the key concern for me. I've got an 8-year-old boy at the moment, and he would be right in there thinking it was all good and fine, and when that stopped, he'd then go to school and do it. I did the same with cowboys and Indians, but it was, you know....

Male, Pakeha, 35-44, Parent, Non-game-playing group

All games do that, because of the adrenaline that's built up ... Even children's games can change them slightly, even perfectly innocent ones ... because they're getting excited about what they're trying to do, and they're trying to do better, and they're trying to do better, and so they're running on adrenaline while they're doing it.

Female, Pakeha, 55+, Parent, Non-game-playing group

I see boys and young males, I've worked with soldiers before, and males are far more prone to do the mimicking thing. I hate to say it about the gender difference, but there is that distinct gender difference.

Male, Pakeha, 35-44, Parent, Non-game-playing group

While some agreed that boys were more likely to exhibit aggressive behaviour, the issue of gender was not a topic extensively discussed by the participants. Some felt that there was no difference between likely responses from young boys or girls, citing examples of both genders imitating things they had seen in games or in films. The majority of participants agreed that whatever the gender, younger people were more likely to be influenced by content in a video game than older players.

They don't have that same level of discrimination between what's real and what they're doing in the game, because they don't have that experience yet.

Female, Other ethnic group, 35-44, Game-players group

This perceived impressionable nature of young people also led participants to identify phobias and nightmares as potential injuries that could result from young people being exposed to violent video games of the calibre of *X Men Origins: Wolverine*.

Nightmares ... they'll correlate something like that to something that they see that is very similar and try hoisting someone into it. And although they're built safe and everything, that doesn't get past the fact that they've actually seen it or, they've become afraid of it. It gives them a phobia of it, 'oh shit it's a ceiling fan. I remember that helicopter and that geezer getting chucked into it. I don't want to go near it'.

Male, Pakeha, 45-54, Parent of child aged 13-17, Game-players group

Throughout the discussion, participants returned to the issue of an increase in violence in society generally, not just within video games. Some participants cited the news as an example of graphic violence being depicted on screens which children were likely to have access to. They expressed concern that constant exposure to scenes of violence could lead to young people becoming desensitised to violence in real life. The sequence referred to above, where Wolverine lifts a helicopter pilot into the propeller blades, also featured in participants' discussion of desensitisation to violence as a result of violent video games.

That's what worried me ... I don't think I went up very high on the scale, simply because I felt completely desensitised. It was just happening and happening and there was just so much of it, it's the same all the time ... I thought I should really be up at eight, somewhere, and I'm not. Because at first most of it was at a distance, it was a whole lot of little figures ... which really wasn't graphic. The bits that I didn't like, the bit I hated, was the helicopter, because that was close ... but most of Wolverine just rushing round and going berserk, and that was a skill he developed, going berserk ... I just found it was desensitising and therefore really no reaction at all.

Female, Pakeha, 55+, Parent, Non-game-playing group

Moderator: *So where does this desensitisation lead to?*

Well, there's two ways it can go. For some people, and we've had indications of that, it can carry over. I think other people can switch off and just see it as, this is a game, and these aren't real people, and let's face it, they don't look all that real – it's not like a movie. I've got a 13-year-old grandson, and he switches off completely. I mean, he will play a game – he'd rather be out playing rugby ... But I mean, he doesn't go round brandishing swords, and there's no aggression as a result, because it is just a game.

Female, Pakeha, 55+, Parent, Non-game-playing group

I've actually worked with a lot of children, from all spectrums and what we actually found is the desensitising is, okay, it's violent, it's a game and everything, but a couple of years down the track, if they see someone hurt, they go 'so what?' So morally and ethically, that's where the desensitising is, from the game, to a couple of years down and you see someone hurt. 'So what if an old person falls over? They've got a walking stick, they can get back up.'

That's the sort of desensitisation it is. In our day if we saw an old person fall over we'd help them up.

Female, Other ethnic group, 35-44, Parent of child aged 13-17, Non-game-playing group

Participants felt that the issue of desensitisation was reinforced by the repetitive nature of the game play in *X-Men Origins: Wolverine*. Members of the non-game-playing group described the game as so repetitive that it became 'boring' and 'mindless'. Other participants also noted the lack of consequences for the game-player as Wolverine committed acts of violence within the game.

They can just keep shooting and shooting and shooting, and killing and killing and killing, and there's no police coming in and saying 'Oi, stop, you can't do that!'

Female, Other ethnic group, 35-44, Parent, Game-players group

The issue of desensitisation and repetition raised questions about the unique aspects of the medium of video games, where the player has, to varying degrees, control of the action which takes place. This was recognised by the participants as being different from other mediums such as film or television, where the relationship between the viewer and what is being depicted is less interactive.

Participants discussed the degree to which, in a video game, the player had control over the level of violence which their character participated in. A member of the game-players group pointed out that in *X Men Origins: Wolverine*, the player really only had to shoot the enemies to progress through the game – while there was the option to kill in more violent and graphic ways, this was not necessary, and therefore potentially less harmful than games where the player receives greater rewards for more violent kills.

I think it depends on the audience, or on the person who's playing it. Like, a younger person is probably not going to have the desire to just kind of slash the crap out of anything.

Male, Pakeha, 25-34, Game-players group

If there was an achievement without killing many people would go for that.

Female, Other ethnic group, 45-54, Parent, Game-players group

The clips involved a mixture of player-instigated game play as well as full motion video (FMV) sequences, in which Wolverine interacted with his surroundings and with enemies in a pre-determined way, which the player had no control over. While some of the participants agreed with the point that game-players could, to a degree, limit the level of violence that Wolverine participated in, the presence of violence in these FMV sequences made many of the participants feel uncomfortable.

Part of what we saw was actual game play, and part of what we saw was what I refer to as 'eye candy'. It's just there to fill in the gaps, to give you some background. Now, the actions that you take, you can control, like you say, how far do you go, do you just kill the guy or do you just beat him to a pulp? You can control that. But the thing you can't control ... that's affecting you. So you've got to sit through that regardless of the level of violence that's within the person ... The head into the helicopter blades, I was sitting there, thinking, 'was that actually necessary'? It was fed to you; you've got no choice in terms of how much violence.

Male, Pakeha, 45-54, Parent of child aged 13-17, Game-players group

As part of this discussion, one participant in the game-playing group mentioned that, when given the option, she 'turned off' the blood in the games she plays. She was uncomfortable with the amount of blood spray shown in the clips, and would have been more comfortable if the game had an option to reduce the level of blood shown. This led to discussion of whether violence was seen by some as an element of appeal in video games. Participants varied in their responses to this concept, some highlighting the merits of video games in terms of skill and dexterity, others finding it difficult to put themselves in the position of the group who they identified as being the likely audience for this sort of game.

As I said, I've got a 13-year-old grandson who plays various games, and he's actually more interested in the skills, and it's the dexterity and the skills rather than – and the blood splatters were blood splatters, but it's not anything he gets a thrill out of or anything like that.

Female, Pakeha, 55+, Parent, Non-game-playing group

It doesn't appeal to me at all, me personally. I can't speak for 16-year-old boys.

Female, Pakeha, 55+, Parent, Non-game-playing group

I think to a kid, to a little boy, it would be appealing and they'd get excited over it. But again, that's actually part of the desensitization [sic] of it. I actually thought, what value did it add, real graphic holes in people and blood and guts going everywhere. It might be that appeal that you're after, that might be why they put it in there.

Male, Pakeha, 35-44, Parent, Non-game-playing group

Again, young people's inability to contextualise or understand what they saw and heard on the screen was cited as a reason why violent video games might appeal to them, and why games such as *X Men Origins: Wolverine* should be age-restricted.

I think for an adult, they associate it with things that occur with blood. But I don't think a child necessarily does. They haven't been exposed to someone having an accident, someone bleeding to death in reality, so it possibly could be amusing to them.

Female, Pakeha, 55+, Parent, Non-game-playing group

While the majority of participants thought that *X Men Origins: Wolverine* should be age-restricted, many felt that such classifications may not stop young people from gaining access to games. Parental responsibility was raised as an issue, with participants feeling that many parents were likely to allow their children access to restricted games either through ignorance of the meaning of the classification, ignorance of the content of the game, or disregard for the censorship system. Participants also suggested that the fact that the object in question was a video game, rather than a film, meant that parents were less likely to be aware of what their children were seeing.

For me, because it's a video game, it's the lack of adult guidance. Because you won't sit there with your child, playing the game. And they just constantly see that stuff.

Female, Māori, 25-34, Parent of child aged 13-17, Non-game-playing group

It still comes down to parental control. If the parent doesn't give a shit, then the kids in the house will have control over whatever if they want. If the parents in the house do care, then they will make an effort to understand what the kids are looking at.

Female, Other ethnic group, 35-44, Parent, Game-players group

I think the big problem today is that children today, particularly in their mid to late teens, spend so much time with no adult around at all. So the parents aren't going to be there to see whether they're watching R18 ... It only takes one parent to provide a child with a video game inappropriate for their age and it will be lent to other children whose parent will have no idea they've ever seen it.

Female, Pakeha, 55+, Parent, Non-game-playing group

However, many participants also cited examples of parents who participated actively in their children's media consumption, and were aware of the adult themes of many video games and would not allow their underage children to play them.

My brother is really tough with his kids. He's got 6 kids, ranging in age from 11 to 20, so he's got to know that they can buy R18 games, and the 18-year-old son likes to play violent games. So that is actually a big concern for him, because [his son] is an adult, and he can bring a game home and play it, but then he's got three little brothers and a little sister who all then potentially have access to that game ... which then means that either my sister-in-law or my brother needs to supervise the kids when they're on the computer, because they're very strict about not letting them play R-rated games.

Female, Other ethnic group, 35-44, Game-players group

If they were playing that, I actually would have stopped them. I mean, they get onto some of the web games at the moment, and if they see too much violence in those, even though it's nowhere near as graphic or as real as what was in there, I'd say, 'look fella, that's not appropriate'.

Male, Pakeha, 35-44, Parent, Non-game-playing group

Participants indicated that there was a need for increased parental awareness of what was in video games, who they were targeted at, and what the classifications meant. They acknowledged that many young people would probably like to play games which they were not legally allowed to, and felt that many parents did not know enough about what their children were accessing through video games, the internet, or television, whether at home or at friends' houses. For this reason, they felt there was a need for a censorship system in relation to video games.

I have two sons who are in their twenties and who are into playing games, the more violent they are, the better they would like them, and neither of them are violent people in their everyday life. But when they were 14, 15, the thought of getting an R18 game or whatever was just really good to them, so the actual labelling, it made it more attractive to them ... the attraction was that they couldn't actually have it ... and they're totally not violent people but they still like the violence of those games.

Moderator: *So do you think we should bother censoring video games then?*

*I do, because as a parent I was able to trust that someone had actually looked at it.
Female, Pakeha, 55+, Parent, Game-players group*

At the end of the discussion, participants were asked to again assign a classification to the game *X-Men Origins: Wolverine*. Fourteen participants (58%) gave the game the same classification they had selected at the conclusion of the Perception Analyser exercise, one participant gave a higher classification and nine (37.5%) lowered their classification. Of those who lowered their classification, five cited the Bill of Rights or freedom of expression as their reason for doing so. While prior to the discussion R18 was the most popular classification, following the discussion R16 was the most common.

	M	R13	R15	R16	R18	Banned
After Perception Analyser	1	2	0	6	14	1
After Discussion	2	1	2	10	9	0

10. Conclusion

Particular concerns arising from participants' discussions included risks of desensitisation and increased aggression from viewing violence in video games, as well as potential injuries of mimicry of violent behaviours. While participants felt that violent video games were likely to have a negative impact on some people, most agreed that if the game was restricted to older people the likelihood of injury to the public good would be reduced. They suggested that younger people lacked the life experience and skills to fully understand and contextualise what they saw in games, whereas the older one got the more those skills developed. This echoes the Office's *Summary of Reasons for Decision* on the game, which notes that:

The unrestricted availability of the game would be injurious to the public good because of the manner in which it deals with matters of violence and horror. The game's graphic depictions of intentional serious physical harm and the high level of gore are likely to disturb children and teenagers. The way in which the game presents violence may have the effect of trivialising such behaviour, particularly upon repeated playing and viewing. Adults are equipped with the maturity and judgement to contextualise the violence and horror within the game and its genre.

This study has confirmed that people who play games, and to a lesser extent people who don't, are concerned that the public good can be injured by exposing young people to video games. It confirms a perception that injury arises not only from a game's violent content, but also from two characteristics

inherent in the nature of the medium conveying that content, namely interactivity and repetition over time. For the Office, this study confirms its emphasis on ‘the impact of the medium’ in s3(4) in its application of the Films, Videos, and Publications Classification Act 1993 to violent video games submitted for classification. While the law clearly sets out the criteria for classifying a publication such as a video game, it is important to the Office to ensure that its classification decisions are in keeping with the standards and expectations of New Zealand society.

On the other hand, this study shows the extent to which the participants’ discourse around video games has been shaped by popular media, which in turn is based on or influenced by media effects theory. Little mention was made of the many ways young people and adults interact with games or of the variety of often critical ways they negotiate the messages of games. Although media effects theory is directly aligned with the Office’s obligation to consider ‘the impact of the medium’ when classifying games, it is not without its critics as discussed in part 5 above. In her review of the Office’s decisions banning four video games, Shanna Bolland, an LLB (Hons) student at Victoria University of Wellington, concluded that⁶

. . . interactivity of the medium is an overbearing influence on censorship decisions, undoubtedly based on a media effects theory that is augmented by the unique aspects of the video game medium. As the impact of the medium is perhaps overused, the primary purpose of entertainment may equally be overlooked. The essence of the framework provided by the statutory criteria in sections 3(3) and 3(4) is that the classification body must have regard to the context in which a publication deals with particular subject-matter. That is, consideration of features other than content is clearly mandated by the legislation, but the Office’s uncritical acceptance of the assumption that interactivity of medium enhances the violence, and thereby increases the impact, is concerning and perhaps unwarranted.⁷ Any special treatment should be founded on research, or at least an explicit policy, which in itself ought to be informed by science and public debate.

This study indicates that further research needs to explore the extent to which the public’s perception of causal links between game playing and various social ills is moderated or even undermined by how players actually respond to and negotiate their way through the content and characteristics of the medium conveying the content. This could lead to the Office giving more accurate weight to other criteria in section 3(4), such as ‘dominant effect’, ‘merit’, ‘purpose’ and ‘other relevant circumstances’, when it classifies video games. As Bolland argues, the effect of good research can only lead to better application of the law which in turn will result in the public good better protected from injury and the freedom of expression otherwise preserved.

⁶ Bolland, Shanna. “Can the ban on four video games be justified?” LLB (Hons) Research Paper, LAWS 520 Censorship and the Freedom of Expression, Victoria University of Wellington, 2008.

⁷ Compare the treatment of the psychological evidence by American courts in *American Amusement Machine Association v Teri Kendrick* 244 F. 3d 572 (2001) and *Interactive Digital Software Association v St Louis County* 329 F 3d 954 (2003).

11. Demographic Summary

Game-players	12
Non-game-players	12

18-24	3
25-34	9
45-44	7
45-54	2
55+	3

NZ European	14
NZ Māori	2
Pacific	1
Asian	2
Other	5

Parent	11
Non-parent	13

Parent of 13-17-year-old	3
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Appendix: Perception Analyser Research by UMR Research Ltd

Report available in PDF form on-line at <http://www.censorship.govt.nz/censorship-research.html>.