

The Facts about Video Game Violence

Presentation to the York Region
Police Services Board

May 2005



ESA Canada

Members:

Microsoft Canada
Sony Computer Entertainment Canada
Nintendo of Canada
Hip Interactive
Take 2 Games
Electronic Arts
Video One Canada
Vivendi Universal Games
Activision
Buena Vista Games
THQ

ESA Canada

- ESAC is the association representing publishers and distributors of video and computer games for game consoles, personal computers, handheld devices and Internet
- ESAC member sales represent over 90% percent of the \$590 million in entertainment software sales in Canada in 2004

An important and growing Canadian industry

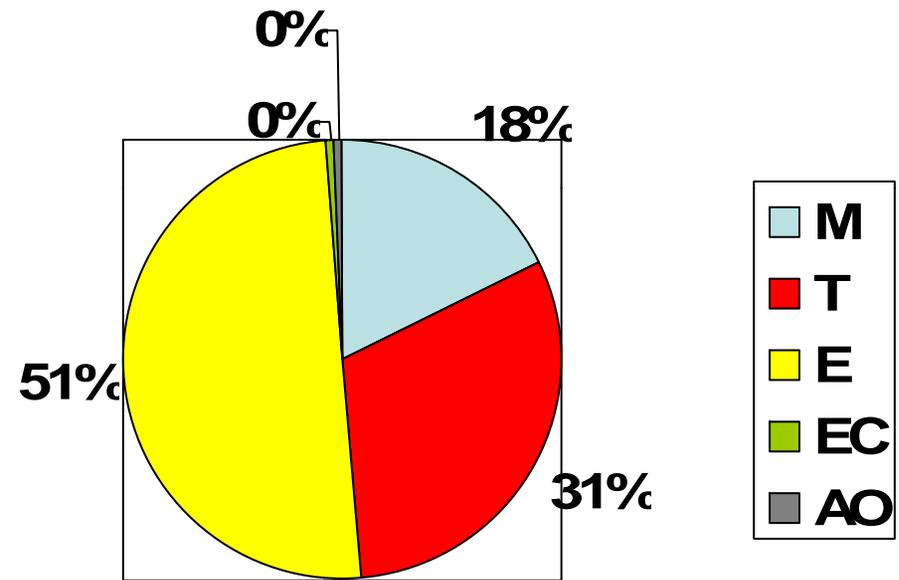
- **Sales growth:** The industry in Canada generated **\$776 M** total revenue in 2004. Video game units sold were up 31% over 2003 (NPD Group)
- **Canadian jobs:** The industry has created **thousands of skilled Canadian jobs** in the development, publishing, distribution and sales of video games, and many best selling games have been developed here in Canada
- **Key part of the Canadian economy:** Copyright industries make up **5.4% of GDP** and grow at a rate faster than the rest of the economy (2004, Dept of Canadian Heritage)

Who plays games?

- Average Age: 30
 - 34% under 18 years
 - 46% 18-50 years
 - 17% 50+ years
- Average age of game buyer: 36
- Male 59%
- Female 39%

2004 Canadian Sales by Rating

- Only 18% of games sold were rated M
- 82% of games sold were rated E or T
- 70% of the top twenty selling video games were rated E or T



Source: NPD Group

ESRB Rating System

Includes 2 components:

1. **Rating Symbols** found on the front of video game packages suggest age appropriateness.
2. **Content Descriptors** on the back of game packages indicate elements that may have triggered a particular rating and/or may be of interest or concern.



ESRB Ratings System

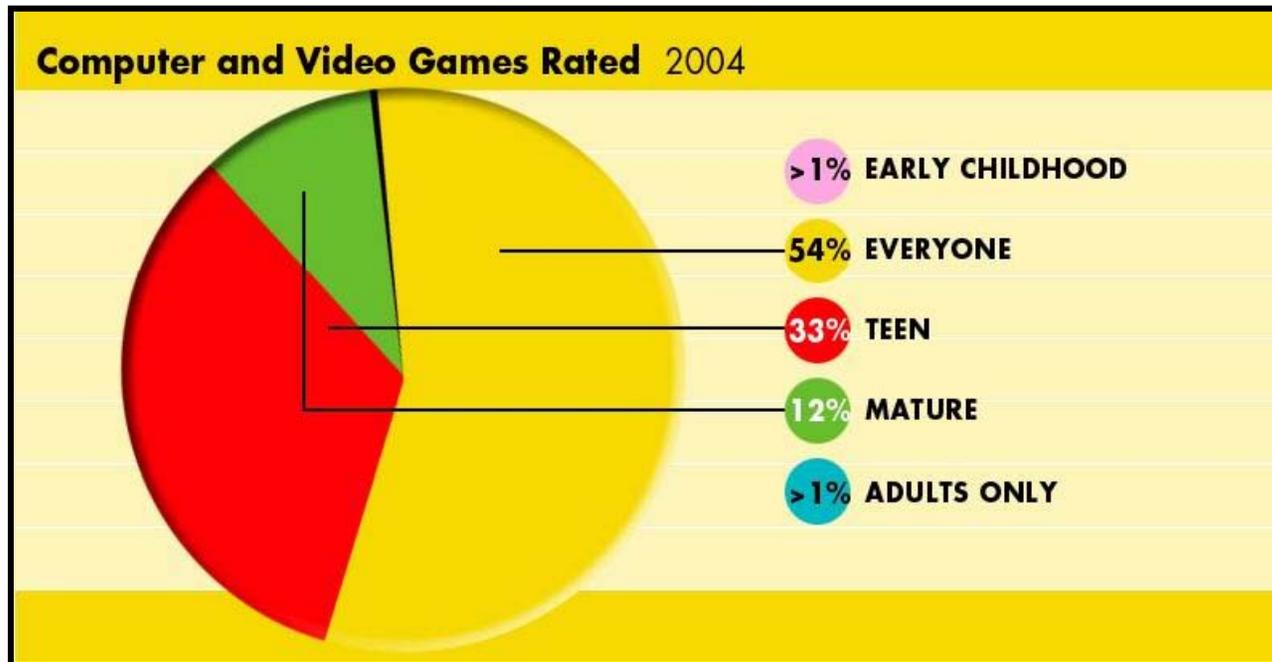
- ESRB ratings are assigned by specially trained raters with no ties to the computer and video game industry
- Selected randomly from a demographically diverse pool, raters assign ratings and content descriptors after reviewing actual game footage, including a game's most extreme content



To address the need for Canadian input into the ratings process, ESRB and ESAC are working with provincial governments to establish a Canadian Advisory Committee to provide feedback and input into ratings policy

Rating Category Breakdown

In 2004, out of 1,036 games rated:



ESRB Rating Category Definitions

	<p>May be suitable for persons 3 years and older. Titles in this category contain no material that parents would find inappropriate.</p>		<p>May be suitable for persons 6 years and older. Titles in this category may contain minimal cartoon, fantasy or mild violence and/or infrequent use of mild language.</p>
	<p>May be suitable for persons 10 years older. Titles in this category may contain more cartoon, fantasy or mild violence, mild language, and/or minimal suggestive themes.</p>		<p>May be suitable for persons 13 years and older. Titles in this category may contain violence, suggestive themes, crude humor, minimal blood and/or infrequent use of strong language.</p>
	<p>May be suitable for persons 17 years and older. Titles in this category may contain intense violence, blood and gore, sexual content and/or strong language.</p>		<p>Content that should only be played by persons 18 years and older. Titles in this category may include prolonged scenes of intense violence and/or graphic sexual content and nudity.</p>

32 Content Descriptors

Violence

Mild Violence
Cartoon Violence
Fantasy Violence
Violence
Intense Violence
Sexual Violence
Animated Blood
Blood
Blood and Gore

Sexuality

Suggestive Themes
Sexual Themes
Strong Sexual Content
Partial Nudity
Nudity

Humor

Comic Mischief
Crude Humor
Mature Humor

Language and Lyrics

Language
Strong Language
Lyrics
Strong Lyrics

Substance

Drug Reference
Use of Drugs
Tobacco Reference
Use of Tobacco
Alcohol Reference
Use of Alcohol

Miscellaneous

Edutainment
Simulated Gambling
Real Gambling
Informational
Some Adult Assistance May Be Needed





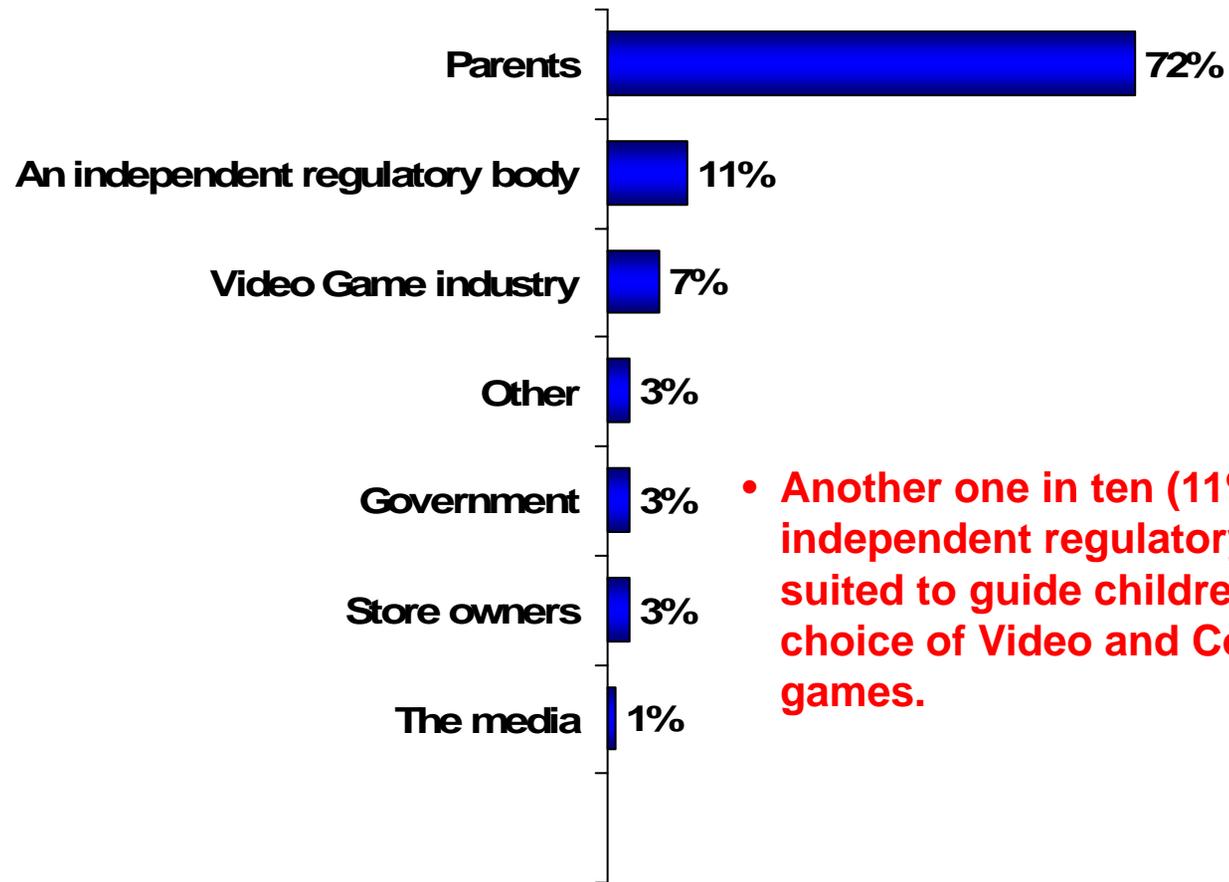
Consumer Research

- 61% of parents are aware of ratings symbols
- 58% of parents are aware of content descriptors
- 71% of parents believe that the ESRB rating system is “somewhat” or “very” effective in providing information about the content of computer and video games

Source: AC Nielsen Study study of 10,000 Canadian Households (Feb/March 2005)

Canadian households overwhelmingly place responsibility with parents

Who is best suited to guide children in their choice of PC & Video Games?



- Another one in ten (11%) regard an independent regulatory body as best suited to guide children in their choice of Video and Computer games.

Base = Responses from households that own a PC and/or video game, N = 7,991,157

Source: AC Nielsen, 2005

Commitment to Parents

Statement of Intent

- “Canadian retailers are **committed to assisting parents in making informed choices for their families** regarding the purchase or rental of interactive video and computer games through parental empowerment programs that combine **ratings education** with **voluntary ratings enforcement.**”
- Over 90% of the video games sold in Canada are from CTP retailers

Retailers Commitment

Ratings enforcement

- Not to sell or rent M rated games to customers under the age of 17
- Not to sell AO rated games to customers under the age of 18
- Implement store policies and systems in support of voluntary ratings enforcement (staff training, store signage, POS prompts)

Retailers Commitment



CHECK THE RATINGS ON EVERY VIDEO & COMPUTER GAME BOX

Rating symbols on the front:



Titles rated **Early Childhood (EC)** have content that may be suitable for persons ages 3 and older. Titles in this category contain no material that parents would find inappropriate.



Titles rated **E (Everyone)** have content that may be suitable for persons ages 6 and older. Titles in this category may contain minimal violence, comic mischief and/or mild language.



Titles rated **Teen (T)** have content that may be suitable for persons ages 13 and older. Titles in this category may contain violent content, mild or strong language, and/or suggestive themes.



Titles rated **M (Mature)** have content that may be suitable for persons ages 17 and older. Titles in this category may contain mature sexual themes, more intense violence and/or strong language.



Titles rated **Adult Only (AO)** have content suitable only for adults. Titles in this category may include graphic depictions of sex and/or violence. Adults Only products are not intended for persons under the age of 18.



Product has been submitted to the ESRB and is awaiting final rating.

Content descriptors on the back:



See back for more details on content descriptors.

Support Ratings Education

- Make ERSB educational material available to customers/ parents
- Participate in *OK to Play?* marketing/ merchandising initiatives

ESAC and Commitment to Parents

- Twice annual signage compliance audits
- Work with RCC in outreach to independent retailers
- Promote *Ok to Play?* PSA campaign to Canadian publications
- Annual research on ratings awareness/effectiveness
- Participate in provincial advisory boards
- Promotion of program in earned media

The Law in Ontario

- New legislation prohibits the sale or rental of M or AO rated games to minors
- Punishable by substantial fine and/or 1 year in prison
- Similar legislation now adopted in BC, MB and NS, other provinces planning to follow suit

Police Services Board Resolution on Video Games

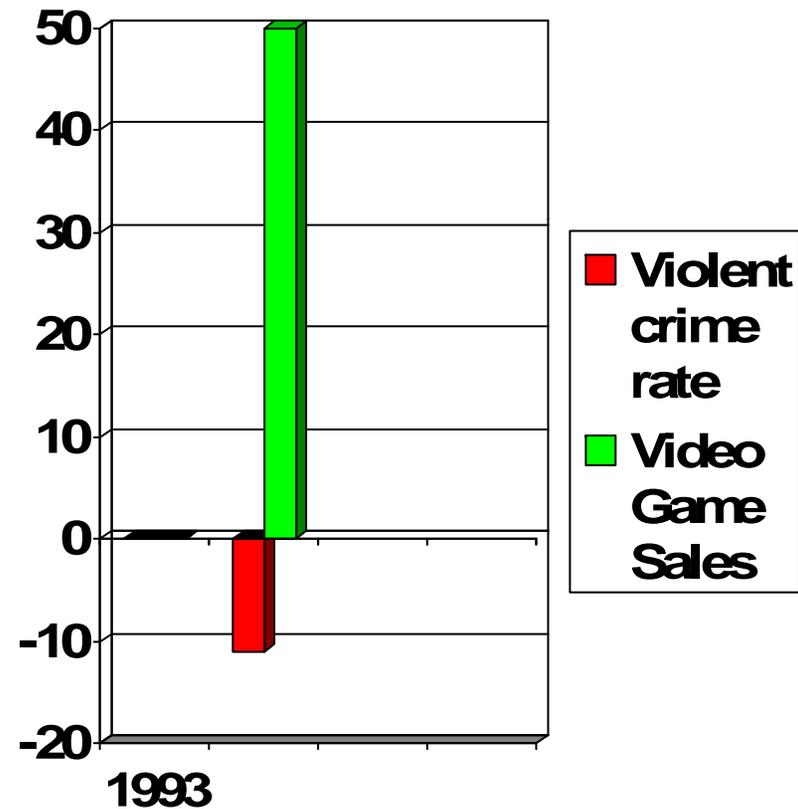
- Advocates major public policy change – shift from consumer education and industry/retailer responsibility to government censorship
- Proposes a different treatment of video games than any other media
- To make an informed decision, we must examine:
 - What are **the facts** about the effects of violent games on behaviour?
 - What are **the implications** of adopting such a policy?

The facts about game violence

- Blaming mass media as the cause of violence in society has been a reoccurring theme since the 19th century (novels, comic books, television, music, now video games)
- Experts agree consensus is lacking on a substantial link between exposure to violent video games and real life violence or crime, for example:
 - Dr Olson, Harvard Medical School Center for Mental Health and Media
 - US Surgeon General
 - US Secret Service
 - US Department of Education
 - Dr Vastag, John Hopkins University

The facts about game violence

- Much of the research demonstrating a link to real life violence has been found to be methodologically flawed and inconsistent
- Violent crime rates in Canada fell 11% between 1993 and 2003, while video game use has soared (North American sales increased by 50%)



Source: IDC/Link and NPD Group for sales data, Statistics Canada for crime rate

The facts about game violence

- Advocating the ban of certain violent games distracts from addressing the real, proven causes of violent behaviour
- The causes of real life violence are much more complex – “the strongest childhood predictors of youth violence are involvement in crime, male gender, illegal substance use, physical aggressiveness, family poverty and anti-social parents” (Dr. C. Olson, Harvard Medical School)

Contributing to the piracy problem

- How do you enforce the ban?
- Canada currently has one of the worst piracy rates in the world
- ESAC research indicates that almost 30% of game players admitted to owning pirated video games
- A government ban means that gamers will turn to the grey or black markets to obtain games, especially through internet downloads
- Organized crime is very active in the piracy market – hacker rings, mod chip manufacturers, illegal importers, distributors
- Many pirates use the money they make to fund other, more serious criminal activity

Other issues to consider

- How do you define “violence against police officers”?
- Would this ban apply to violence that serves a worthy end (e.g. a SWAT team rescuing hostages, WWII recreations where the Allied forces battle the Nazis)?
- Legally, how could the ban censor video games, and not books, movies, music, TV or the internet?
- Is this policy consistent with Canadians’ Charter right to free expression?

How can we have a positive impact?

- Banning violent games does not address from the real causes of violent crime
- Its enforcement would take limited police resources away from where they are really needed
- **Police, government, industry and retailers can work together to educate parents and consumers about the ESRB ratings system and urge them to take an active role in deciding what is appropriate for their families**



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