

**SPECIAL AGENDA III**

**PRIVATE MEMBER'S MOTIONS**

**VIOLENT COMPUTER GAMES**

**A background paper from the Mission and Public Affairs Council**

*Mr Thomas Benyon (Oxford) to move:*

'That this Synod:

- (a) express concern about the potentially desensitising and damaging effects upon children and young people of computer games containing gratuitous violent and sexual content;
- (b) request changes to the classification system for video games in the United Kingdom to strengthen appropriate age rating and effective enforcement;
- (c) call upon HM Government to review the regulatory system for advertising video games to prevent the targeting of children and young people with unsuitable material; and
- (d) support programmes of education for both parents and children in managing access to video games.'

**Introduction:**

1. Computer games and console games are ubiquitous and big business. In addition to the large consoles with disk drives, such as Microsoft X Box, Sony Playstation and Nintendo Wii, there are also handheld portable consoles such as the PSP, and Nintendo DS. PC games are played on a computer. The majority of children are therefore exposed to the playing of such games, if not in their own homes then at friends' houses. Also increasingly hotels have Playstations in rooms and clubs for children may hold 'Playstation' evenings. More and more computer games also offer the opportunity for online play in which gamers can interact, create teams or oppose each other over the internet. Games are very widely available in shops and most films aimed at children and teenagers release an accompanying game.
2. Consequently there is a very wide range and selection of games, some of which are very beautiful<sup>1</sup>, intellectually stimulating<sup>2</sup>, challenging<sup>3</sup> and creative<sup>4</sup>. Many have award winning soundtracks, extraordinary artwork and interesting stories. Some pose moral and ethical questions so that sometimes progression in a game depends on the choices the character makes, such as saving other characters or making a sacrifice. Others offer exercise and fitness regimes<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Eg The *Myst* series, including *Uru*

<sup>2</sup> Eg *The Logical Journey of the Zoombinis*

<sup>3</sup> Eg *Schizm: Mysterious Journey*

<sup>4</sup> Eg society/empire building games such as *Civilization*

<sup>5</sup> Wii sports games using the Wii fit

## Violence in games

3. However some games, especially those designed as a first person shooter (FPS) experience feature extreme graphic violence<sup>6</sup>, sexual scenes<sup>7</sup>, or violent psychological horror<sup>8</sup>. A large number of other games feature violence in the sense that characters progress by defeating enemies with weapons. Even young children's games like *Ratchet and Clank* or *Crash Bandicoot* have to destroy enemies in this way or be 'killed' by them. However, this is described as cartoon violence and it is notable that enemies come back to life on restart or the playable character 'respawns'. In some games for younger children the notes suggest that a character 'faints' rather than dies.
4. Although extreme violence is restricted to a few games, some of these are phenomenally popular<sup>9</sup>. *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* sold 1.23million units in the UK the day it was released<sup>10</sup> and some stores opened at midnight to supply enthusiastic gamers. COD 2 features soldiers with realistic weapons and grenades in combat situations killing enemies who register the shots with clouds of blood. There was controversy about a scene involving a shoot-out in an airport in which civilians can be killed and who do not respawn. Following the controversy, some versions of the game were edited to lead to a Game Over screen if the player killed civilians. However even extremely popular 'moderate' games such as *Tomb Raider* involve images of violent deaths for the player such as being impaled on spikes, falling from heights on to hard floors and drowning. Some extremely violent games have been banned: *Manhunt 2* was banned in Britain in 2007 for being disproportionately violent (ban reversed on appeal to the Video Appeal Committee in 2008) and a Japanese game, *RapeLay*, which features graphic sexual sadism was also banned by retailer Amazon<sup>11</sup>.
5. It has been argued that violent games may be more harmful to children than watching violence on TV because of the interactive nature of the game, where the player identifies with the character being played. However not all researchers agree and controversy about this has existed for at least the past 15 years. There have been some suggestions that playing violent games increases aggression in players because of the immersive nature of the games.<sup>12</sup> Dr Craig Anderson in the US is an outspoken proponent of the idea that violent games promote aggressive behaviour. He argues strongly that exposure to violent computer games increases violent and aggressive thoughts and feelings in children and young adults and that socially benevolent behaviour such as sharing and empathy is decreased by such exposure.<sup>13</sup> 'exposure to violent video games is significantly linked to increases in aggressive behaviour, aggressive cognition, aggressive affect, and cardiovascular arousal, and to decreases in helping behaviour. Experimental studies reveal this linkage to be causal. Correlational studies reveal a linkage to serious, real-world types of aggression'<sup>14</sup>. He further argues that the harm may have been consistently underestimated.

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<sup>6</sup> Eg *Call of Duty: modern warfare*

<sup>7</sup> Eg *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*

<sup>8</sup> Eg *Silent Hill* series, *Resident Evil*, *F.E.A.R*

<sup>9</sup> On 5<sup>th</sup> January 2010 at 6pm UK time there were 507, 629 players online on the X box version alone, not including those playing on PS3 or PC.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/gamesblog/2009/nov/11/modern-warfare-2-sales-record>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/4611161/Rapelay-virtual-rape-game-banned-by-Amazon.html>

<sup>12</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/720707.stm>

<sup>13</sup> Craig A. Anderson and Brad J. Bushman, 'Effects of Violent Video Games on Aggressive Behavior, Aggressive Cognition, Aggressive Affect, Physiological Arousal, and Prosocial Behavior: A Meta-Analytic Review of the Scientific Literature', 2001 *Psychological Science* 12, 353-359

<sup>14</sup> Craig A Anderson, 'An update on the effects of playing violent video games' *Journal of Adolescence* 27 (2004) 113-122 available online at <http://medi506.pbworks.com/f/sdarticle-4.pdf>

6. However, Dr Anderson's findings are disputed by others. In a review of the available literature by Mark Griffiths of Nottingham Trent University<sup>15</sup>, he drew attention to flaws in the methods of assessment available, such as observing children's free play after playing the games. In essence, research has only identified possible short term effects, but it is not clear what the long term effects of exposure to violent computer games might be or how any such effects would transpose to behaviour in the real world. Dr Guy Cumberbatch of the Communications Research Group and a British specialist on media and violence also disagrees with Dr Anderson's views. Some deaths have been controversially attributed to the perpetrators playing violent games<sup>16</sup>. However, the direct evidence still remains mixed<sup>17</sup> and it is clearly not ethical to test in extensive studies whether violent games disturb children and younger people.
7. There are two issues of particular relevance emerging from the controversy. On one level the argument is whether exposure to violent games *causes* violent behaviour resulting in harm to others and crime. There is little evidence for this. The other, and potentially more relevant issue, is whether exposure to violent games desensitises those who play them, disengaging children and young people from prosocial behaviour such as sharing and helping others and having effects on friendships and relationships with others such as teachers. It is not clear whether these effects result from exposure to violent games or could potentially include prolonged exposure to *any* game where interaction with the game cuts the gamer off from others: 'I can't help you because I have to finish this level'.

### Classification

8. Classification of games in the UK is now similar to films and games carry information about the violent content of the game: 'cartoon violence', 'moderate violence' 'strong violence' and 'strong bloody violence'. Information is also posted about the level of horror. Stores are required to check for the age of the purchaser.

### Byron review<sup>18</sup>

9. The Byron review *Safer Children in a Digital World*, was commissioned by the government in 2007 and reported in 2008. It found a number of particular issues for consideration:
  - Children need to be empowered to deal with the range of games on offer. Just arguing about the mixed evidence regarding whether violent games cause aggression does not help children cope with exposure or make good choices about what to play.
  - Parents feel powerless and so may become risk averse. They too need help.
  - Children may be more technologically aware than their parents but they need help to make wise decisions
  - Everyone needs to work together to minimise risk to harmful exposure
  - There is a need for a national strategy, increased self-regulation, and better information for families

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<sup>15</sup> Mark Griffiths, 'Violent video games and aggression: a review of the literature' *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, Volume 4, Issue 2, Summer 1999, pp 203-212

<sup>16</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/leicestershire/3934277.stm>

<sup>17</sup> Jessica Nicoll & Kevin M. Kieffer, 'Violence in Video Games: A Review of the Empirical Research.' Presentation to the American Psychological Association, August 2005; Dmitri Williams & Marko Skoric, *Internet Fantasy Violence: A Test of Aggression in an Online Game. Communication Monographs*, June 2005.

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/byronreview/>

- There should be improvement of age restriction enforcement
- There should be an effort to raise awareness of what is in any game

10. The Byron review made some specific recommendations to achieve these aims:

- Lowering the statutory requirement to classify video games to 12+, that is consistent with film classification and easier for parents.
- Putting in place a hybrid classification system, using both PEGI [Pan European Game Information] and BBFC [British Board of Film Classification] mechanisms with one set of symbols, from BBFC, for parents to understand.
- Having clear and consistent guidance for industry on how games should be advertised.
- Challenging industry to provide sustained and high profile efforts to increase parents understanding of age ratings and improved parental controls.

11. The government accepted these recommendations and agreed to develop a comprehensive action plan in response.<sup>19</sup> This was published in June 2008.<sup>20</sup> The Action Plan describes:

- The purpose and work of the UK Council for Child Internet Safety
- Development of better self-regulation by the industry
- A public information and awareness campaign
- Better education through schools and other agencies
- Reform of the classification system
- Improvement of better information and support for parents

The timescale for these improvements was for implementation by Spring 2009. The Digital Economy Bill currently working its way through Parliament includes provision for implementing changes to video games classification as recommended in the Byron review, extending the range of video games that are subject to requirements to be age-rated. The Act will allow for the introduction of a new designated authority which will use the Pan-European Game Information age rating system to classify games; the authority will also be obliged to develop an effective system to gauge UK public opinion and take account of it in its decision-making.

12. The Government has therefore already examined and reacted to the issue of how children and young people might be affected by access to violent computer games. However the Synod might also like to consider:

- What Christians might want to say about the acceptability of fantasy actions and behaviour (such as killing) which are contrary to the gospel in 'real life' and about the ambiguous morality of some games.
- What Christians might want to say about biblical portrayals of graphic aggression and violence (including sexual violence) and whether our understanding of these accounts equips us to help children and young people make good judgements about violence in other media.
- How Christians should react to the portrayal in games of extreme violence, gratuitous sexual elements (including sexual stereotyping) and extreme psychological horror.

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<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmhansrd/cm080327/wmstext/80327m0001.htm#0803276500013>

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/byronreview/actionplan/>

- How parents and those who work with children know how to recognise gaming addiction and the stressful effects of playing violent and other games for long periods.
- Whether Christians should positively advocate games which stimulate exploration, learning, co-operation, creativity and/or fitness.

Dr Philip Giddings  
*Chair: Mission and Public Affairs Council*  
January 2010

### **Further reading:**

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