

Graffiti computer game banned in Australia

Bi-partisan censorship campaign targets youth

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8 March 2006

Last month's decision by Australia's Office of Film and Literature Classification (OFLC) to ban the American computer game *Getting Up: Contents Under Pressure*—the only country in the world to do so—is another demonstration of the bi-partisan character of the attacks on freedom of expression and democratic rights now underway. The ruling, which is clearly directed against youth, highlights the acute nervousness of state authorities towards anything that may encourage young people to challenge the powers that be.

Created by US designer of youth lifestyle products Mark Ecko and distributed by Atari, *Getting Up: Contents Under Pressure* involves players assuming the role of Trane, a graffiti artist. In the process, players find that their talent as graffiti artists can be used as a tool to expose a dictatorial local government in the city New Radius. Trane gathers support by getting his “tag” up in as many places as possible and through that leads an urban revolution to overthrow the despotic city mayor who has banned freedom of expression.

The game was initially due for release in Australia on February 17, after the OFLC initially granted it an MA15+ rating on November 18, last year. But this was overturned in a bi-partisan campaign involving Queensland and Western Australian local councils and the Queensland Labor government, who claimed that the game would encourage youth to “vandalise the community”.

Queensland Premier Peter Beattie told parliament last year that the game made “heroes of a cast of reckless characters” and could “steer impressionable young people into activities that will endanger life and limb and earn them criminal records.... This is anathema to most Queenslanders and certainly to this government.”

After the game was passed by the OFLC in November, Beattie wrote to the Howard government's attorney general Philip Ruddock demanding that it be banned and a new OFLC hearing was initiated.

Under Australia's current classification system there are no provisions to rate games considered unsuitable for minors but available to adults. For instance, a film classified R18+ is restricted to adults over 18. For computer games an MA15+

classification means that the game is recommended for over 15 year olds. Any computer game that the OFLC considers falls outside the MA15+ rating is refused classification and banned, making it illegal for adults as well.

Gold Coast Mayor and former Olympic athlete, Ron Clarke, who was a major figure in the campaign, hailed last week's decision claiming that the game was an “evil attempt to influence youngsters to break the law, fight the police and deface public buildings”.

These allegations are ludicrous and have nothing to do with “stopping youth crime” as claimed by the game opponents. Nor is it accidental that the OFLC has blocked a game about popular youth resistance to a regime that suppresses free speech. In fact, it is the political challenge to authority, however limited, that the game encourages which is concerning the OFLC and the state and federal government.

A statement issued by Atari pointed to these obvious parallels. The ban, it stated, was “an ironic instance of ‘Life imitating Art’ in that *Getting Up* takes place in a world where freedom of expression is suppressed by a tyrannical government. It is unfortunate that during this day and age a government will implement censorship policies which are tantamount to book burning practices from the past. Banning any form of artistic expression suppresses creativity and begs the question “Where does it end?”

“... Just as classic works of art such as music, books and paintings or modern forms of entertainment such as films and television shows present fictionalised entertainment depicting stories, cultures, characters and actions that may be exaggerated versions of “real-life” people or events, video games such as *Getting Up* provide amusement and escape in a fantasy world where players can vicariously experience different lifestyles.... The focus of the game is on expression through art and Atari will vehemently fight its censorship.”

Mark Ecko, who was a graffiti artist in his youth, told the *Sydney Morning Herald* that, “to blame gaming for everything that is inherently wrong in our homes, in our schools and on our streets is much easier to do than to actually figure out ways to fix the systemic problems that exist within our culture.” While

Ecko and Atari have vowed to challenge the ban on *Getting Up*, their only recourse is the lengthy and costly process of having an Administrative Decisions Judicial Review in the Federal Court.

Last year New York mayor Michael Bloomberg failed in his attempts to ban a graffiti-themed promotional party for Ecko's game. Model subway cars were to be decorated by twenty former graffiti artists. Bloomberg claimed that this would encourage vandalism.

Ecko challenged this in the Manhattan federal court, which ruled that the mayor's ban was a "flagrant violation" of First Amendment rights. Judge Jed Rakoff noted in his judgment, "By the same token, presumably, a street performance of [Shakespeare's] *Hamlet* would be tantamount to encouraging revenge murder.... As for the street performance of *Oedipus Rex*, don't even think about it ..."

The basic principles underpinning the Manhattan decision, however, were ignored by the Australian OFLC. A brief statement issued by OFLC Review Board convenor Maureen Shelley simply repeated claims by the Queensland Labor premier and local councils that the game "promotes the crime of graffiti."

It is important to note that Shelley's claims and the "concerns" of Clark, Beattie and other local politicians have not been applied to the scores of anti-social and dehumanising computer games now available that sensationalise far more destructive activities such as killing and war, themes that happen to coincide with the current agenda of Australia's ruling elite.

Desert Storm, which was released prior to the US-led invasion of Iraq, for example, allows participants, playing either US Special Forces or British SAS snipers, to "take down" a moustachioed Saddam Hussein look-alike called General Aziz. Another game, *Kuma War* enables players to go on recreated missions, such as the bomb raid that killed Saddam Hussein's two sons, Uday and Qusay. It includes video footage from Iraq and Afghanistan, and those with broadband connection can download updates from any new war zones.

Others recent releases include, *Act of War: Direct Action*, in which the player commands anti-terror military units to kill or be killed in cities under siege; *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, which consists of spray-painting gang logos, assault, robbery, killing sprees and the rape of prostitutes; *The Warriors*, which is adapted from the movie of the same name and features extreme gang violence; and *50 Cent: Bulletproof* based on the rap singer 50 Cent, which has a section entitled "Stealth Kill" where the player aims to kill an enemy without being noticed.

New South Wales Council for Civil Liberties president Cameron Murphy told the media last week that the game ban was "ridiculous" and said that the Classification Review Board did not "understand the technology".

This argument, however, fails to deal with the political nature of the OFLC decision, which is an integral part of an escalating

attack by both the Labor and Liberal parties on democratic and civil rights in Australia.

Soon after it was first elected in 1996, the Howard government, with tactical support from the Labor Party, moved to beef up censorship guidelines and begin appointing conservative figures to the OFLC.

Under Australian law, the governor-general, on the advice of the attorney-general who consults with state and territory ministers, appoints OFLC members. They are not required to have expertise in the fields of art or literature, and none of the current members has any serious qualifications in these fields. Their backgrounds are in economics, social work, law and business.

As board members retired they were replaced by conservative elements, including, in one notorious case, a member of the ruling Liberal Party. Des Clark, the current OFLC director, for example, was a leading member of the Liberal Party in Victoria and mayor of Melbourne in the early 1990s.

OFLC Review Board convenor Maureen Shelley is typical. She is a senior journalist with Murdoch's Sydney tabloid the *Daily Telegraph*, which is notorious for its right-wing demands for repressive law and order measures against young people. Shelley, who was appointed in 2001 on the recommendation of the attorney-general, is a former chief executive officer of the Australian Council of Businesswomen and former Trustee of the Committee for Economic Development of Australia.

Under these appointees, the OFLC has made increasingly narrow censorship decisions. In 2003, for the first time in 30 years, the OFLC blocked the screening of a movie at a local film festival (see "Australian government bans Sydney Film Festival movie"). A year later, during the last federal election, the deputy prime minister John Anderson declared that if the coalition government won a majority in the Senate it would revisit censorship laws and introduce measures that addressed the "breakdown in relationship values". In other words the sort of moral issues favoured by right-wing Christian formations, such as Family First.

After ten years in office the Howard government now has the sort of OFLC that it wants. The organisation increasingly functions as an instrument to outlaw or silence perceived or real political dissent, or any challenge to authority—especially if it involves young people.



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