



**Violence in video game  
consoles : How can the  
information provided to  
consumers be improved  
?**

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For the Industry Canada Office of Consumer Affairs

April 2002



## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

This research project was coordinated by Geneviève Reed, Head of the Press Agency, and by Patrick Vanasse, Head of research and representation. Catherine Goldschmidt and Danielle Charbonneau wrote the report.

"Option Consommateurs" is very grateful to Industry Canada for the financial support they provided so that this research project may be completed.

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ISBN 2-921588-37-4

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Video games are a flourishing market which three main players, Sony, Nintendo and Microsoft profit from. Video games emerged in the 1970s and were originally designed for children and adolescents. They now interest people of all ages more and more, notably because users are getting older and the technology is improving. Now, when we speak of video games, one cannot exclusively think of them as « products for children and adolescents », but similarly to other written and audiovisual devices, as products for people of different ages. This is even more true because there are violent games on the market to which children should not have access. This has led many researchers to study the impact of video games on children's behaviour. The research that has been done isn't very conclusive and is often contradictory. On the other hand, most specialists agree on the importance of protecting children from violent content. Result: Everywhere around the world, parents, even organizations and governments are preoccupied by the existence of violent video games.

We did our own documented research which revealed that different measures have been taken to inform consumers on the presence of violence in video games. Since the 1990s, many countries have implemented a rating system. In Australia video games are rated by the government and the different states, unlike Europe and North America, where games are rated by the video game industry. Since 1994, in the United States and Canada, the *Entertainment Software Rating Board* (ESRB) has been rating the video games that are available on the market. Aware of this problem of violence, the industry has also taken measures to limit the publicity surrounding video games rated M (Mature for 17 and older). Recently, the ESRB started imposing fines on manufacturers who use inadequate marketing techniques. Unfortunately, a report produced for the American government

shows that despite the industry's recommendations, businesses continue to sell video games rated M to children who are under 17<sup>1</sup>.

We also did a survey in certain parts of Canada which enabled us to find out what the habits of Canadian consumers are pertaining to the purchase of video games as well as their degree of satisfaction with the rating system. Moreover, we completed three investigations, all three carried out in Montreal, the aim of which was to evaluate the quality of the information provided to consumers. We examined the packagings of 45 video games, tested 10 games and investigated 20 stores that sell and rent console video games, to see if children have access to violent games and to gather comments from employees on the ESRB rating system and on the phenomenon of violence. Results from this study enabled us to get a good idea of the whole problematic surrounding violence in console video games in North America and to make certain recommendations in order to improve the information given to consumers.

The investigations showed that a little more than half of consumers are very worried about the violence in video games. Nevertheless, the situation doesn't seem too alarming. Consumers rely mostly on the text, the images and the rating to determine if the game they want to purchase is violent. However, when the time comes for them to make a decision, the images and the text aren't always clear as to the game's degree of violence. The ESRB therefore seems to be a good way to provide more accurate information, particularly since manufacturers don't indicate a minimum age on their packagings. Moreover ESRB ratings are adhered to by manufacturers because all games on the North American market are rated by this organization, which is not the case for European markets. This is a true success, due to the fact that the ESRB haven't existed for very long. Parents find that the rating system is satisfying enough, but they nevertheless suggested that the organization should improve their ratings by adding detailed comments, warnings in capital letters or by systematically indicating the minimum age recommended for a specific game. These improvements seem essential to

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<sup>1</sup> FEDERAL TRADE COMMISSION (FTC), Marketing Violent Entertainment to Children: a one-year follow-up; review of industry practices in the motion picture, music recording & electronic game industries. A report to congress, 2001.

the extent that the ESRB system isn't always precise. Indeed, the rates T (Teen) and M (Mature), which refer to specific ages, i.e. 13 and 17, are rarely seen on packagings. Furthermore, if the descriptors notes which accompany certain ratings enable people to understand this rating, they're nevertheless not specific enough. It's therefore difficult for the consumer to know precisely which type of violence is in the game. Moreover, studies done in the United States show that the assigning of ratings has become a bit lax<sup>2</sup>. This observation lead us to consider the creation of a committee reuniting representatives from the industry, retailers and consumers. It seems important for an organization to properly assign ratings to ensure that the interests of the industry don't dominate over those of consumers.

Industry players, conscious of the problem of violence in video games, have taken different measures to inform the population of the existence of a rating system and to limit the publicity surrounding video games rated M (Mature) among children younger than 17. Result: Store employees know the system well and a little more than half of parents use it to guide them in their purchases. However, stores who offer information on the rating system are rare. Furthermore, in the United States for example, we noted that despite the presence of a rating system, many children play with games that are not recommended for their age group, which lead us to do a small investigation of a certain number of stores in order to find out the buying and renting habits of consumers.

During this investigation, we noted that parents tend to find out if the game they're buying for their child is violent, when they purchase it in a store that is family oriented. The sales policy of these retailers is strict: Children cannot buy games that are rated M (Mature) unless they are accompanied by an adult. ESRB ratings are well known there and adhered to. These stores however constitute a minority. Indeed, the policy of retailers where customers tend to be older isn't nearly as strict. Even if a store's employees are familiar with the rating system, stores don't provide any written information and let children buy or rent games not recommended for their age group. Furthermore games rated M (Mature) are sometimes put on display at any hour of the day. We also noted that

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<sup>2</sup> THOMPSON, Kimberley M., ScD, HANINGER, Kevin, Violence in e-rated video games, medicine and the media, vol 286, No.5.

parents don't worry as much about violence when the game is rented rather than purchased. Certain rental stores have implemented control systems (file, age, indicator, restrictions) to check if the game a child wants to rent is suitable for his/her age group. These initiatives are unfortunately not applied all over. Even if it were the case, children can still from time to time obtain games that are not for their age group. Since certain retailers tend not to be strict enough, maybe the sale of video games should be regulated. This recommendation is supported by consumers because according to our survey, 80% of parents agree that retailers should be under the legal obligation of imposing an age limit in respect to access to video games.

The results of this study have led us to make the following recommendations :

- Improve the current ESRB rating system : systematically indicate the recommended age group and increase the number of descriptors on packages.
- An information campaign to sensitize the Canadian population to the rating system, in order to protect children and guide consumers in their purchases or rentals.
- A systematic broadcasting of information in stores and especially in rental outlets, explaining the rating system, with posters, brochures, etc.
- The implementation of a committee bringing together publishers, distributors and consumers in order to discuss the stakes involved in video game violence and to evaluate consumer complaints. If a rating is deemed inappropriate, the committee would invite the publisher to justify their choice and if need be, to rectify it. The committee could also provide publishers with an evaluation grid that gives access to definitions and procedures used by the ESRB to rate games. This way consumers could be certain that the rating system is dependable, and could make comments or object if they don't agree with a specific rating (by of course using the same guidelines). This committee would ensure that the interests of consumers be a priority over those of the video game industry.

- Finally, a standardization of store policies pertaining to the sale and rental of video games with the passing of a law which would impose fines on retailers who sell video games to children who are not of the right age group as per the ESRB ratings.

## INTRODUCTION

Many factors have lead us to do this study in order to better understand the phenomenon of violence in console video games, its use, its stakes and to suggest solutions. Among these factors, there is the increase of violence in general in our society, a rise in popularity of video games, the existence of violent games, reports in the media of murders committed by children who are fans of video games, studies on the subject, and the concerns of parents, specialists and even governments in the face of this increasing violence.

To better understand this problem we examined the research that had been done on the subject, the magnitude and the type of violence found in video games, how and why young people use video games, as well as the different measures put forth in Canada and in other countries to increase the information provided to consumers in this area. We also evaluated the needs of consumers by doing a survey among the Canadian population and families who contribute to the annual toy guide published by the magazine *Protégez-Vous*. This enabled us to find out their expectations and their needs pertaining to information on violence. Moreover we asked families to evaluate 10 games containing more or less violence and to give us their opinions. We also examined 45 video game packagings in order to evaluate the quality of the information that is printed. Finally we did a small investigation of stores that sell and rent console video games to gather comments from employees on the subject of violence and to validate the policies put forth to keep children from having access to video games that are not recommended for their age group.

The results enabled us to determine in which manner it would be possible to improve the information given out to consumers and to propose intervention strategies to reach that goal.

## **1- THE CONTEXT**

### **1.1- The video game industry in North America : a market in full expansion**

Since they first appeared in the early 1970s, video games have become increasingly popular and there's been a tremendous upsurge in their development in the last decade. The video game industry is a particularly prosperous market which currently brings in 20 billion dollars US worldwide. In 2001, in the United States only, the sales figure for this industry was 9.4 billion dollars US compared to 6.6 billion in 2000, beating the numbers for movie ticket sales. This represents an increase of close to 43%, this number due of course to the launch of three new consoles: *Game Boy Advance*, the *Gamecube* and the *XBOX*. These numbers will continue to increase because for the next five years, the sales estimate for consoles and games is 32.6 billion dollars US. In Quebec, according to the polling firm Léger & Léger, video game sales should go from 2.4 billion dollars CAN in 1999 to 17.8 billion in 2004<sup>3</sup>. In this industry, the console video game sector is in full expansion and represents 70% of the sales figure. Certain companies, such as Vivendi Universal, devote 50% of their production to this sector, which represents a 20% increase in comparison to previous years.

The console video game market is very focused. Today there are three major manufacturers who aim at seducing not only children and adolescents but also parents and even grandparents. These manufacturers are Sony, undisputed leader, owning 59% of market shares, Nintendo, with 32 %, and recently Microsoft who emerged on the market in November 2001 with their *XBOX* console. The latter is likely to gain control of an important portion of the market because Sega, which represented 9% of the market, have abandoned production of their Dreamcast console in order to devote themselves to the design of video games only. By 2006, according to the American research company

Forrester, three homes out of four, and almost as many in Canada, will have video game consoles. More than 150 million new generation consoles – Sony's *Playstation 2*, Microsoft's *XBOX* and Nintendo's *Gamecube*- will be sold by the end of 2004.

## **1.2- Console video game users**

There are more and more people who play with video games. A study done by Peter D.Hart Research showed that in 1999, 60 % of Americans had taken up this hobby. Less than 10 years ago Nintendo was the market's undisputed leader. Their products are still for children and adolescents. However in the last few years, the profile of the video game following has changed. A set of factors have favoured the creation of games for older people, such as the launching of Sony's *Playstation*, the coming of age of players who grew up on video games, their interest in darker, more sinister games, with plenty of action, and improvements in technology. The average age of people who play with video games and use computer software has substantially increased because in recent years, it has been estimated at 28 years of age.

However children are still great fans of video games. According to a phone survey done in 1999 where 275 Quebecers were polled, 19.5% of people said that video games was one of two main after school activities that their children aged 6 to 16 had (excluding homework)<sup>4</sup>. In 1992, there were already 1.3 million young people in Quebec between the ages of 8 and 15 who used video game consoles. In Canada, close to 20 % of homes had a Nintendo console and the Province of Quebec has the highest percentage in the country (22%). Children play with video games an average of 90 minutes per day.

Furthermore, the age of players varies from one console to the other. Most Nintendo products are used by young adolescents. Sony and Microsoft consoles are more for adolescents and adults because they offer the possibility of using DVDs and the Internet, and they especially have a vast array of action games that are more complex and increasingly realistic. Also console video games have often attracted males more than

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<sup>3</sup> LÉGER & LÉGER, Recherche et marketing, *Les Québécois et leurs loisirs*, 1999.

females. This is also changing because the industry wants to seduce women as much as men, children and teenagers as much as adults. This results in a wider variety of games.

## **1.3- Violence in video games**

### ***1.3.1- State of the market***

Since video games first appeared, violence has almost always been present. The first violent game appeared soon after the 1972 unveiling of Pong, the first video game to simulate an electronic ping-pong game in black and white. In this instance, it was a car racing game called *Death Race 2000*, in which players made points by running over spectators. In 1976, it was taken off the shelves following complaints from consumers. Since then similar games have seen the light of day and consumers continue to complain, governments around the world continue to censor them. Furthermore, the media have contributed to reinforcing public fears by systematically implicating video games in the shootings carried out by children.

Around twenty years ago, groups promoting non violence blasted the industry by claiming that more than 70% of games were violent. Today these numbers haven't changed and if there are certain groups that denounce the increase in violence, it's mainly due to improving technologies. Games are more and more realistic, with punches, kicks, screams, blood that gushes as well as shooting. The violence in certain games is extreme, because it's merciless insofar as the player has to eliminate the enemy to continue playing. In the last few years, more perverted and antisocial games have surfaced, games that reward death and depravity, more so than your typical shooting game. These games, even if they aren't numerous, obviously show that video games aren't just for children anymore.

Unlike computer games, console video games offer products that promote action instead of the educational aspect. Result : Claude Arson, who hosts the television show Mr. Net,

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<sup>4</sup> LÉGER & LÉGER, Recherche et marketing, *Les Québécois et leurs loisirs*, 1999.

says : « games with no fighting are very rare. However there are games who have fighting in them without violence. No blood, no direct hits, no pain ». Signs of violence as well as their intensity vary from one game to the other.

The statistics which are compiled to determine the exact percentage of violent games available on the market are contradictory. On one hand, the users and the industry say that 80% of games aren't violent and on the other hand, there are those who speak out against violence and maintain that over 70% of games are violent. Research done on the *Entertainment Software Rating Board* (ESRB) website, an American rating system that rates video games sold on the North-American market, enabled us to determine the approximate number of available console video games for each rating<sup>5</sup>. It would seem that the vast majority of console video games (70%) are for all ages. Only 23 % of video games are rated for teenagers of 13 and over (Teen) and 7 % are for a mature consumer group, i.e. 17 and older (Mature), because of the type of violence the games contain. The games that are rated Mature (17 and older) are essentially action type games containing realistic violence scenes that often include blood, killing, etc. However there are also games for young children which contain violence. The latter is referred to as light violence (battle scenes in sports games, etc.) Therefore more than half of these games, whatever the age group, contain descriptors indicating a certain level of violence that goes from light to extreme. These statistics are provided by a rating system implemented by the industry. We did research and performed tests in order to check the system's dependability. The results are presented in section 2 of this report.

We looked for games containing sometimes extreme violence that are manufactured for adults or adolescents, and that look attractive to young adolescents and children. There are children who play with violent games, which increases the concerns felt by parents and education specialists.

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<sup>5</sup> ENTERTAINMENT SOFTWARE REVIEW BOARD, [www.esrb.com](http://www.esrb.com).

### **1.3.2- Studies**

As soon as the 1980s video games had become so popular that psychologists, education specialists and parents began to ask questions. Based on the principle that children learn by imitating others, most studies in this field speak of the impact of violent video games on children's behaviour. Not everyone agrees on the answers. This often results in studies and opinions that are often contradictory.

Most studies show that there are moderate effects based only on the immediate aftermath, but none of these studies have shown that being exposed to violent video games had long term effects on the possibility of serious pathological behaviour. According to Robert Philippe, psychologist and Director of the *Centre d'intervention et de recherche sur la violence*, the claim that violent video games will have a damaging influence, is wrong : *«Of course video games containing violence can reinforce certain pre-existing aggressive behaviours but violent games are not the cause of violent behaviour. There are many factors to take into consideration when attempting to explain a violent act. It cannot be explained by a cause and effect phenomenon. An individual's environment is infinitely more complex than what we are tempted to reduce it to.»* However, the majority of specialists agree that there are a certain number of images and scenes that children cannot and should not see too early on, such as scenes of violence that are too realistic, gratuitous, close-ups, etc. According to Dr. Catherine Epelbaum, child psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, an extremely precocious use of video games by children – who often don't master language- can have a serious and negative affect on their mental health.

Other specialists, such as Dr.Ginette Goulard, a psychiatrist for adolescents, fears that young people will end up trivializing violence if overly exposed to it. According to Brent de Waal, PhD student at the Simon-Fraser University media laboratory in British Columbia, young people quickly and easily get used to seeing scenes of violence. "Inside the conditions of the game, there is a set cycle that could be described as a form of desensitization when they get tired of the game. When what began as excitement becomes trivial, game manufacturers create games with more action and violence in order to entice them to buy new products".

Whatever the case may be, game publishers, distributors, parents and the government have a social responsibility. All individuals, adults and children, are not equally able to protect themselves. Children don't have the maturity to look at scenes of violence with a discerning eye. Consequently violent games aren't for everyone and it becomes imperative to protect children and inform those parents who wish to know what kinds of games their children are playing with.

### ***1.3.3- Measures***

We checked what measures have been taken to provide information to consumers on the subject of violence in video games and on how to protect children against it.

#### ***1.3.3.1- Rating systems***

##### ***1.3.3.1.1- Europe and Australia***

The sale of violent video games has always been controversial and this is true for different countries. Pressure from the public and from various organizations pushed certain governments to consider the implementation of regulations to have a better control over the violent video games that will end up on the market. The reaction of industry publishers came soon after. To avoid all attempts at controlling their industry certain countries adopted rating systems such as the *European Leisure Software Publishers Association* (ELSPA, Great Britain), The *Syndicat des éditeurs de logiciels de loisirs* (SELL, France) or the *Entertainment Software Self-Regulation Body* (Unterhaltungssoftware Selbstkontrolle or USK, Germany). The organizations that manage them all have contributors among them who belong to video game and computer software industry. Every publisher fills out an evaluation grid to determine the age group that best suits a specific game. The criteria and the ratings vary from one country to the other (please refer to appendix A).

Each organization also created a commission that reunites representatives from the video game industry, as well as distributors and consumers in order to follow up on disputable ratings, if any.

Last March, the *Conseil des consommateurs de l'Union européenne* adopted a resolution to improve the labelling of video and computer games. They suggest that the systems that are already in place in the various nations be a result of cooperation between industry experts, consumer groups as well as representatives from the age groups that are concerned.

Only Australia has a rating system that is different from the known European rating systems, because it's under the jurisdiction of the Central State, states and territories and not of the video game industry. This way, the Central State is responsible for rating movies, computer games, console video games and certain publications. States and territories make sure that the law is enforced. The system is regulated by a national classification code that names and describes all rating categories, including those that exist for consulting purposes and those that are restrictive by law. The code also describes the material that the Commission can refuse to classify. Certain video games can be censored or reserved for children over 15. In accordance with state and territorial laws, substantial fines can be imposed to those who sell games that have not been rated, especially if these games obtained a limited rating afterwards or if the rating was rejected.

#### *1.3.3.1.2- North America*

In Canada, despite the presence of games that are not suitable for young children, there is no legislation that regulates access. There is however a North-American rating system which was created in the mid 1990s in the United States. At that time, the public and the American Congress put pressure on manufacturers by threatening to implement regulations for video games.

In 1994, the industry reacted quickly by coming up with rating systems in order to offer credible information to consumers pertaining to the content of video games. In this context, the *Recreational Software Advisory Council* (RSAC) and the *Entertainment Software Review Board* (ESRB) saw the light of day, these two rating systems being regulated by 2 non-profit organizations with ties to the video game industry. The first one was for computer software only and suggested age categories and a temperature pictogram indicating the game's level of violence, nudity and language on a scale of one

through four. In 1999, the RSAC merged their activities with those of the *Internet Content Rating Association* which currently manages a rating system for Web content. The second one, the *Entertainment Software Review Board* is still in effect on the North-American market. It was developed in cooperation with the *Interactive Digital Software Association* (IDSA). The IDSA's Canadian equivalent is the *Canadian International Digital Software Association* (CIDSA) which brings together Canadian manufacturers of video games, software designers, distributors and retailers. The CIDSA notably promotes the broadcasting of the ESRB's rating system by encouraging its members to submit all new products to the ESRB and by giving out information on the video game rating system. According to Harvey Nightingale, President of the CIDSA, the organization has distributed more than 100 000 recommendations this way in more than 5000 sales outlets, including posters, brochures and cards. The information is bilingual. The CIDSA informs the public through specialty magazines, trade shows and other industry circuits. The *International Game Developers Association* (IGDA) created a committee on violence, not to debate the impact that violence has on children, but rather to sensitize game designers and make them accountable.

However the ESRB rating system does not meet with unanimous approval. In 2000, for the first time, British Columbia's provincial film rating board, forbade the sale of a specific video game to minors. The game was called *Soldier of Fortune*, an action game whose main character is an antiterrorist mercenary who kills and mutilates animals and humans. British Columbia is the first province to voice their intention of passing legislation pertaining to the access to violent video games by minors. Projects of this kind exist in the United States, for example in Arkansas where the state is considering making a video game rating system mandatory and the sale or rental of violent video games to minors illegal. To this day, all of these bill projects are in the preliminary stages.

### **1.3.3.2- Publicity ads for games rated Mature (17 years and older)**

A *Federal Trade Commission* report published last December denounces trying to sell games rated M to kids who are under 17<sup>6</sup>. Indeed these games are shown in the publicity ads and specialty magazines that young people usually read. What's even more of a cause for concern is the growing popularity of on-line games, where there are plenty of publicity ads that parents don't see. According to the report, this goes against the rating system and sheds doubt on the true intentions of the industry pertaining to the problem of violence in video games. Therefore, the *Interactive Digital Software Association* (IDSA) adopted standards which set limits relating to the publicity surrounding games rated Mature (17 years and older) and which can be seen or read by kids under 17 through the various media available. Furthermore, since last November, the ESRB has imposed a substantial fine to manufacturers who use inadequate marketing strategies.

### **1.3.3.3- Selling video games**

Retailers also have a part to play in the thought process and the actions to be taken surrounding the distribution of games containing violence. They're at the center of evolving life styles. Members of the *Interactive Entertainment Merchants Association* (IEMA), an organizations made up of retailers, have purposely changed their regular publications (brochures, catalogs and magazines) in order to advertise and explain the ESRB rating system.

However despite the industry's recommendations and due to the absence of legislation, retailers in the United States sell video games to children who don't belong to the recommended age group as per the ESRB rating system. A report commissioned by the American government and published by the *Federal Trade Commission*<sup>7</sup>, indicates that employees don't respect the indications written on the packagings and sell games rated M

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<sup>6</sup> FEDERAL TRADE COMMISSION (FTC), *Marketing violent entertainment to children : a one-year follow-up review of industry practices in the motion picture, music recording & electronic game industries. A report to congress.* 2001.

<sup>7</sup> FEDERAL TRADE COMMISSION (FTC), *Marketing Violent Entertainment to Children : a one-year follow-up Review of industry Praticce in the motion picture, music recording & Electronic Game industries. A report to congress.* 2001.

(Mature, 17 years and +) to children who are under 17. According to the report, children who are between the ages of 13 and 16 and who are not accompanied by an adult, have access to games rated M, 85% of the time. Two Senators, Joseph Lieberman and Herb Kohl, sent a letter to 34 store chains that sell video games to remind them of the age group recommendations. However, there are retailers who have made their position official and have stated that they forbid the sale of games rated M to young children. That is the case for *Wal Mart* and *Toys r'Us*. This lead us to do a small investigation of a few retailers to see if this standard exists in the Province of Quebec also and by the same token, to obtain the opinion of employees on the subject of violence in video games. The results are presented in the second part of this report.

#### ***1.3.3.4- The organizations***

The Province of Quebec has a few organizations that educate and sensitize people to violence, as well as university organizations that do research on medias. Their research focuses mainly on television but some are also now taking a look at video games. Such is the case with Pacijou, a non-profit organization which offers training and conferences to parents and teachers to create awareness among young people on the subject of violence in the media. The organization also offers educational seminars, conferences on youth culture and on the possible alternative solutions to violent and sexist behaviours. Every year, an organization called TROP (Travail de réflexion pour des ondes pacifiques) asks young people and parents to choose the most and least violent games. Children and parents sharpen up on their judgement skills. The results of the vote are unveiled every June 1st. The organization also provides schools with a guide which explains in detail the organization's objectives and suggests activities to create awareness pertaining to violence in television. The other organizations focus less on video games. The *Groupe de recherche sur les jeunes et les médias* (GRJM) has done only one study on video games.

Furthermore there is a bilingual website on the Internet that offers complete and relevant documentation on video games. The site is called *Réseau Éducation-Médias* and offers a series of articles on the subject of video games. It also gives the address and phone

number of the industry's various players and of the various organizations that are relevant to this particular field <sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> RÉSEAU ÉDUCATION-MÉDIAS, [www.reseau-media.ca](http://www.reseau-media.ca).

## **2- RESEARCH RESULTS**

The object of our research was to verify if the information that is provided to consumers is adequate. With this in mind we obtained the opinions of Canadian consumers through a survey. We also visited several stores that specialize in selling or renting console video games in order to validate the quality of the information printed on 45 packagings and to gather comments from employees. Finally, we asked children to play with 10 video games containing more or less violence and to give us their opinion.

### **2.1- Survey done by the Environnics Research Group**

#### ***2.1.1- Methodology***

Last December, we asked the *Environnics Research Group* to do a survey to find out the opinions of parents of children between the ages of 8 and 17 on the subject of violence in console video games and on the quality of the information printed on the packagings. We prepared a questionnaire which was presented first to the families that are members of the Option Consommateurs team who test toys for the *Guide des Jouets* (annual guide). This questionnaire was modified to take into account the many comments that were made (Please refer to the final version of the questionnaire in appendix B).

Between December 17th 2001 and January 6th 2002, a telephone survey was conducted with 349 parents of children between the ages of 8 and 17 who own or rent console video games (these children are more susceptible of escaping parental control and of playing with video games not recommended for their age group). To be able to reach these people, the firm that conducted the survey contacted 2 030 Canadians who are over 18 and who live in one of Canada's ten provinces.

The margin of error for a stratified sample of this size is estimated at +/- 2,2 %, 19 times out of 20. The margin error for the sample of 349 Canadians who have a child or children between the ages of 8 and 17 and who own or rent console video games is +/- 5,2%, 19 times out of 20.

## ***2.1.2- Results***

### ***2.1.2.1- Console video games that are rented or purchased***

The survey indicates that 15% of people own or rent a video game console. Of those, sixty per cent (60 %) have indicated that they own one. French speaking parents outnumber English speaking parents (72% as opposed to 57%). Thirty-five percent (35%) say that they own or rent a Playstation console. These numbers therefore confirm the popularity of the Nintendo console among families.

### ***2.1.2.2- Who is responsible for renting or buying video games***

Close to seven out of ten parents (69 %) state that they're generally the ones who buy the video games in their families. However the latter seem less involved when it comes to renting video games. A little less than four parents out of ten (37 %) state that the children are the ones who generally rent video games in their family. Thirty-five percent (35 %) say that it's the parents who generally rent the games.

### ***2.1.2.3- Rental/purchase of video games that are not suitable for a child's age group***

A little less than three parents out of ten (27 %) say that their child has rented or purchased a video game not recommended for his/her age group. Two thirds of parents (67 %) say that their children have never rented or purchased a video game not recommended for their age group.

However there is a nuance brought to these results when certain elements, obtained during tests conducted on video games by families, are taken into consideration. Indeed, certain parents refused to test some of the games because the rating did not correspond to

their child's age. However, after having discussed the game with their children, they were surprised to discover that they had at one time rented or played with these games at a friend's house.

#### ***2.1.2.4- Violence in video games***

More than half of parents said that the violence in video games worries them enormously (24 %) or a lot (32 %). More than a quarter of people surveyed (27 %) said that the violence in video games worries them a bit and a little less than two people out of ten (17 %) say that they're not concerned at all over the violence in video games. Women (29 %) outnumber men (17 %) when it comes to worrying over the violence in video games.

#### ***2.1.2.5- What actions are taken to identify violence in video games***

We asked those parents who are responsible for buying or renting video games what it is they do to find out if a specific game contains violence. The most common answers were : They read the game's description (34 %), they look at the images on the packaging (23%), or they see if the game is considered violent by the ESRB (18 %). A smaller number of people mentioned that they speak with a store employee (13 %), try the game out before buying it, take a look at it (12 %), go by word of mouth (9%), read the ESRB's descriptors (5 %), go on the Internet (4 %), consult the literature/ publicity or the media (3 %) or read specialty magazines (2 %). Nineteen percent (19 %) say they don't take any steps at all to find out if a game is violent.

Women, more so than men, read a game's description (38 % as opposed to 28 %) and speak with a store employee (17 % as opposed to 9 %).

#### ***2.1.2.6- The violence observed in video games***

We asked parents if, after having purchased or rented a video game, they realized that a game was more violent than they had originally thought. Close to half of the people who were surveyed (46 %) say that this had been the case.

More women (51 %) than men (40 %) say that they realized a game was more violent than they had originally thought.

#### ***2.1.2.7- Satisfaction with the current rating system***

The people who were surveyed are reasonably satisfied with the rating system. We estimate that the degree of satisfaction is moderately high because only 19 % were very satisfied. Six parents out of ten (61 %) say that the system used to rate the violence in video games and which appears on the packaging is very satisfying (19 %) or satisfying enough (42 %). Only a quarter of people surveyed (24 %) say that they're not pleased with the system at all (8%) or that they're little pleased (16%) . Fifteen percent didn't answer the question.

#### ***2.1.2.8- Improving the information printed on packagings***

When we asked those who were surveyed how the information printed on the packagings of video games could be improved upon, most of the time they suggested that detailed comments on the type of violence the games contain be written (27 %). Among other things, they suggested more visible warnings, in capital letters (18 %), indicating the minimum required age (13 %), a scale representing the different levels of violence (11 %), implementing the same rating system that was developed for film and television (10 %), having a classification system (4 %), not selling or buying violent video games to children (3 %), warnings for parents (2 %) and clearer and simpler information on the rating system (2 %). One person out of ten said that no improvements were necessary, that the information is currently adequate, and 19% didn't answer the question.

Twice as many French speaking parents (17 %), as opposed to English speaking parents (8 %), said that the information printed on the packaging is adequate.

#### ***2.1.2.9- Regulating the rating system***

The parents who were surveyed were informed that video games fall under the jurisdiction of a rating system developed by the industry, not the government, and that it

isn't regulated. We then asked them if, in their opinion, this rating system should be supervised by the industry or a public or governmental organization.

The majority of people unequivocally believe that the rating system should fall under the jurisdiction of a public or governmental organization (68 %). Only 22 % of parents said that the rating system should be run by the video game industry.

Women (71 %), more so than men (64 %), would prefer it if the rating system were overseen by a public or governmental organization.

#### ***2.1.2.10- Restrictions pertaining to the age of video game users***

Eight parents out of ten (80 %) agree that retailers should be under the legal obligation of enforcing minimum age requirements, with the help of a rating system whereby games would be classified by age. Only two parents out of ten (19 %) oppose such a measure.

This high rate of people confirms the percentage published in the 6th annual report of the *National Institute on Media and the Family*, which indicates that 93 % of parents agree that store chains should restrict the access given to adult video games and should also reinforce their store policies<sup>9</sup>.

#### ***2.1.3- Conclusion***

The survey confirms that parents are worried about the violence in video games. It would seem however that the situation isn't alarming. The methods used to verify the presence of violence are varied: Most of the time, the people who were surveyed read the game's description, look at the images and check the rating to see if the game they're buying or renting contains violence. In doing this, they consider the information to be reasonably satisfactory. Nevertheless parents suggested a few improvements because close to half of them realized that the game they had purchased or rented was more violent than they had originally believed. Notably they suggested that the rating system be made more efficient

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<sup>9</sup> WALSH, David, *Sixth Annual Video and Computer Game Report Card. National Institute on Media and the Family*, 2001.

with more detailed comments, more visible warnings and the mention of a minimum age on packagings. Parents consider that the rating system should fall under the jurisdiction of a public or governmental organization and they agree with the idea that retailers enforce age limits as to access to video games.

## **2.2- The information printed on the packagings**

### ***2.2.1- Methodology***

We checked the number of games rated by the ESRB. Afterwards we carefully examined the packagings of 45 video games, put on the market between 1999 et 2000 (Please refer to appendix C). These games were designed for the different consoles available, such as Playstation, Playstation 2, Nintendo 64, Dreamcast, Gamecube and XBOX. Twenty-two were rated T (Teen, 13 years and over) and 23 were rated M (Mature, 17 years and over) by the ESRB. We verified the information concerning the type of violence by reading descriptors, by examining the images and the ESRB rating system. Finally, we verified that the information provided by the ESRB is in accordance with the information on the Internet and provided by their automated telephone system.

### ***2.2.2- Results***

#### ***2.2.2.1- Descriptors and images***

Unlike computer software, manufacturers never indicate the age recommended for their games. It's therefore difficult for parents to know if the game they want to buy is suitable for their child.

As the *Environnics* survey reveals, consumers read the description and look at the images on the packaging to find out if the game contains violence. The analysis of 45 packagings shows that there is uniformity in the way games are presented. Each description is accompanied by a few scenes from the game. On the whole, descriptors texts and images

evoke the presence of more or less violence. Out of the 23 games rated M (Mature) that we checked, 21 games revealed the presence of violence in texts or images. Out of 22 games rated T (Teen), 21 had violence in the texts or in the images on the front and/or the back. However, it's important to qualify these results. The images and descriptors are reasonably satisfactory. They reveal the presence of more or less violence. However it's difficult to evaluate precisely for what age group a specific game is designed because some of them display the same kind of descriptors and images. That's the case with *Metal Gear Solid 2* which doesn't show much violence in its images. The description signals the presence of an armed arsenal, similar to *MDK2 Armageddon*. However the game is rated M (Mature) while the other one is rated T (Teen).

On the other hand, the packagings of the games *Resident Evil X Code Veronica* and *Perfect Dark* are not adequate because the French version of the instruction booklet hides the back of the packaging and keeps the consumer from seeing the images, the text and the ESRB's descriptive markings.

Finally the images of 4 games rated M (Mature) show little violence. The descriptions compensate for this by offering a bit more detail. Again, you have to be able to read English. Furthermore, the packaging of the game *Crazy Taxi*, rated T (Teen) shows no violence. The images only show cars in full action. The ESRB rating can therefore be a useful tool for parents who are familiar with it because images and texts sometimes lack detail.

### ***2.2.2.2- The Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) rating system***

#### *2.2.2.2.1- A system that is recognized*

All the games available in the stores that we visited were rated by the *Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB)*. Created six years ago, this rating system is therefore recognized and used by all manufacturers. According to Jason Della Rocca, representative for the Province of Quebec office of the International Game Developers Association, the ESRB rating system has no control over the content of video games. To compensate for this, the ESRB works with game designers and publishers to make sure

that the content of a game is in sync with its classification. The rating system influences the designers to a small extent when they know the criteria. According to Stéphane Brochu, script writer for *Microïd*: « Rating systems around the world influence game designers to a certain extent. There are no written rules but we do know that in Germany for instance, you have to avoid blood, and in the United States, alcohol and nudity when we want our games to be sold to people under 17». However, Stéphane Brochu thinks that a game's originality and its potential dominate over its rating. « I created a police investigation game where murders are committed by decapitation. My superior rejected the concept because he found it too violent and said that it wouldn't pass the rating stage. Finally, after a while and following some discussion, the game was approved on a marketing level since the concept was new».

#### *2.2.2.2.2- Description and analysis of the rating system*

The display of the rating system is satisfactory. Each company prints the rating at the same spot on the packagings. This constitutes a good point of reference for consumers. The rating is visible on the front of the packaging; on the lower right for Nintendo and Sega products and lower left for Sony and Microsoft. Sometimes on the back there are descriptors (Please refer to appendix D) that go from « mild animated violence » to « realistic blood and gore». These notes are similar to the ones used by the Australian rating system. They are relevant and justify the selection of a particular rating.

The ESRB rating system is descriptive. No restrictive labelling can be found such as “not recommended or forbidden for people under 13”. The system provides 6 ratings for as many age groups: (EC) young children, (E) everyone, which replaced the (KA) rating (children to adults) in 1998, (T) teenagers (M) young adults, A (adults only) and (RP), which means the game has not been through the rating process yet. The rating is pending. These ratings are attributed in consideration of violent content, pornography, racism or any other element that’s present in each video game. Each rating is equivalent to six different age groups: 3 years and older, 6 years and older, 13 years and older, 17 years and older and finally 18 years and older.



However, we realized that the age to which the rating corresponds is never written on the front of the packaging. Consequently, the consumers who are being introduced to the system for the first time have no way of knowing which age corresponds to the rating. If we compare this system to the European rating systems, the latter systematically indicate the minimum age requirements. Moreover, they have colours that can be easily recognized by consumers, unlike ESRB rates that are in black and white.

Sometimes, certain descriptors on the back of the packagings are accompanied by a minimum age recommendation, such as 13 + or 17 +. Out of 45 packagings that we looked over, only six indicated the required age. That number was bigger for Nintendo products (five out of six) which in addition sometimes display warnings on the back of the packaging. The game *Bad Fur Day* therefore has the following warning : *Not recommended for those under 17* (Please refer to appendix D). Please note that we didn’t find any games for adults only on the store shelves. However, the ESRB website does say that there are games rated Adults only (A) available with Playstation 2.

We noted that out of 45 packagings, four games rated T (Teen) had the same descriptors than certain games rated M (Mature). That's the case with the game *Dark Angel Vampire Apocalypse* which contains the note « Blood and gore violence » and which is usually found on most games rated M (Mature). The images and texts signal a little or a lot of violence. Also, the game *Dead or Alive 3* signals the presence of themes suitable for a more mature audience. This game however is rated T (Teen).

Finally, the size and the position of the descriptors vary from one company to another as well as from one game to the other.

#### *2.2.2.2.3- The ESRB phone system and website*

The ESRB's address, telephone number as well as their Internet address are indicated on most packagings (38/45), on the back, below the descriptors. Consumers can therefore reach the organization if they need to. We telephoned the ESRB and consulted their website to obtain additional information and to verify if it's consistent with the information printed on the packagings. The information is satisfactory and is consistent with the ratings and the descriptors on the packagings. Research on the ESRB website is more reliable and faster than if you use their automated telephone system. Nine games weren't properly rated or untraceable via the telephone system as opposed to one game only on the website.

We didn't get an answer to the questions we sent by e-mail. We reached an employee by phone who assured us that all messages were read despite the auto reply. Unsatisfied consumers can submit a complaint to the ESRB in writing. There is no rating system for complaints in Canada.

To summarize, here are the strong points and the weak points pertaining to the rating system :

#### *2.2.2.2.4- Strong points*

- The system is recognized and used by the industry. It's used for all video games destined for the North-American market.

- The display of ratings and descriptors is pretty much standardized. Only the size varies.
- The descriptors enable consumers to understand the reasons why a particular rating was designated.
- The descriptors and images aren't explicit enough at times as to the sort of violence present in the game. The ESRB rating is therefore useful to the consumer.
- The website is satisfactory. Consumers can do a search by title, by category, by rating, by descriptor, etc.
- Their telephone system enables consumers to obtain additional descriptors.

#### *2.2.2.2.5- Weak points*

- The system is rather vague for those consumers who are getting acquainted with it for the first time.
- The absence of coloured ratings doesn't grab the attention of consumers who aren't familiar with the system.
- The ESRB rating system isn't restrictive. The age group that corresponds to the rating is rarely indicated.
- Certain games are given the same rating and the same descriptors, even if the level of violence is different. It's therefore difficult to precisely quantify the violence.
- The phone system makes a few rating mistakes.

- The French instruction booklet is often placed on the back, thereby hiding the text, the images and descriptors.

### ***2.2.3- The reliability of the rating system***

#### ***2.2.3.1- Testing the products***

Companies voluntarily submit their products to be rated before they become available for purchase in various stores. The ESRB rates games based on excerpts supplied by the manufacturer. Each product is evaluated by three qualified people from different socio-economic and professional backgrounds and who have no ties to the video game industry.

This procedure can seem cursory. However, in our experience, it's difficult to have video games evaluated by independent people because they require a lot of time. If all films or video cassettes can be seen in an average of 90 minutes, it sometimes takes up to 100 hours to review a game. Since hundreds of games have to be rated every year, this solution is not at all practical. By doing these tests, the ESRB distinguishes themselves from European publishers. Indeed, as we saw in chapter 3.3 of the first section, publishers rate the games themselves by filling out an evaluation grid. This method gets mixed reviews. A vast number of publishers don't systematically use it and certain games go up for sale without having been rated. This is not the case for the North-American market, where all games are rated by the ESRB.

#### ***2.2.3.2- Studies on the reliability of the system***

The ESRB rating system is relatively recent. There are therefore few studies that have tested its reliability. The results are contradictory because the samples vary and the methods used are different from one study to another.

The ESRB conducted an investigation with 410 adults of various nationalities, including 246 parents. The ESRB asked them to rate video games in accordance with ESRB standards. The study shows that 84% of all games were classified equally to or a bit less

severely than the ESRB had rated them. Participants generally agreed with the content of descriptors and when they disagreed, they weren't as strict as the ESRB. However, the latest report of the *National Institute on Media and the Family*, an independent American organization, says that the ESRB ratings are becoming less severe<sup>10</sup>. According to about fifty parents who each year verify the accuracy of the ratings, 31 % of the games rated T in 2001 should have been rated M as opposed to 23 % in 2000. Another study done by the *Harvard Center for Risk Analysis* concludes that 64 % of 55 games published between 1985 and 2000, rated E by the ESRB, are violent<sup>11</sup>. Moreover the absence of descriptors does not mean that the game isn't violent. The study reveals that there are almost identical games who are attributed different ratings, depending on the consoles they are compatible with, which is something that can be confusing for consumers. Such is the case with *Gex 3: Deep Cover Gecko* rated T for Playstation but E for Nintendo 64. To obtain consistent results, we think that all studies should use the same evaluation grid.

The study reveals also that 52 % of parents do a follow up on ratings before making a decision. 55% therefore say that they're familiar with the rating system. Nevertheless, according to Jason Della Rocca representative with the IGDA, not enough parents know of the rating system.

## **2.3- Testing video games**

### **2.3.1- Methodology**

We selected 10 console video games published between 1999 and 2001, rated T or M by the ESRB and displaying different descriptors that evoke the presence of violence in the game (Please refer to appendix D). Of this number, six were available on Sony Playstation 2 and four games on Nintendo 64, which is in keeping with their respective share of the market, i.e 59% for Sony and 32% for Nintendo. Because of our small sample, we chose

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<sup>10</sup> WALSH, David, *Sixth Annual Video and Computer Game Report Card. National Institute on Media and the Family*, 2001

<sup>11</sup> THOMPSON, Kimberley M., ScD, HANINGER, Kevin, *Violence in E-Rated Video Games, Medicine and the media vol 286, No.5.*

not to look at the games available on Dreamcast because Sega, who control only 9% of the market, announced their decision to forego production of their console to focus on designing games for other consoles only. There are no XBOX and Gamecube games because these consoles weren't available yet when we made our selection in June 2001.

Most video games that were selected for our study are action games. There are various types of games, i.e. adventure, strategy, etc., but the most popular category is by far action games. Also, this category has a vast array of games containing more or less violence. In 1998, action games made up more than half the sales for Playstation 1 and 2 and a third of those for Nintendo 64.

We developed an evaluation grid by using our expertise in the field of game testing and by using the criteria set up by the ESRB (Please refer to appendix E).

Each game was tested during a two week period by four families who are very familiar with video games. The children and adolescents were between the ages of 8 and 17. Some of them didn't have the minimum required age recommended by the ESRB. Certain parents nevertheless accepted to have their children participate, others rejected certain games by looking at the packagings and by judging them unsuitable for their child. Each family evaluated their level of interest in the games as well as the degree of violence and the accuracy of the ESRB rating by filling out the proposed evaluation grid.

We remind you that this study is for the purpose of research and that the tests are therefore not scientific. Our objective was to obtain the opinions of children and parents on the subject of violent video games. Some of the participants completed their task, while other didn't because they found it too difficult or due to their lack of interest. Researchers from Option Consommateurs tried out all the games as well.

## **2.3.2- Results**

### **2.3.2.1- *Fur Fighter (Playstation 2)***

*Fur Fighter Plus* is an action game where stuffed animals try to rescue their cubs who have been kidnapped and they wage armed combat. The animals are animated figures. The game is rated Teen (13 years and over) by the ESRB.

The player moves through a toy universe. There are many weapons and the player constantly has to shoot at other characters. Severed heads sometimes remain on the ground. There is no blood. When a character is hit, it loses its fluff. The participants showed no interest in the game.

The children who tested the game felt that the information written on the packaging (text, images, rating) was accurate and agreed with the ESRB on their rating.

### **2.3.2.2- *Bloody Roar 3 (Playstation 2)***

*Bloody Roar* is a death combat game where characters become wild beasts and fight. Each warrior has specific moves that are particularly violent. They can impale themselves but there's no close up of their wounds. The game is rated Teen (13 years and over) by the ESRB. Participants showed interest in this game.

The children who tested the game felt that the information written on the packaging (text, images, rating) was accurate and agreed with the ESRB on their rating.

### **2.3.2.3- *Crazy Taxi (Playstation 2)***

*Crazy Taxi* is a racing game where the objective is to make a living by driving a cab. The aim of the game is to take your customers to where they want to go as quickly as possible. There are no road regulations and any method used to get there is okay, whether it's a short cut, jumping over other cars, or driving the wrong way. The game is rated Teen (13 years and older) by the ESRB.

The game offers collision scenes, but there are no weapons or any killing. People on foot cannot get run over. The interest shown in this game was non lasting because participants found it too repetitive.

The participants all said that this game wasn't violent and believed that the rating attributed to it by the ESRB was too severe. The game was thought to be suitable for everyone.

#### ***2.3.2.4- MDK 2 Armageddon (Playstation 2)***

*MDK 2 Armageddon* is an action game where three characters try in succession to save the earth from an alien invasion. It's rated Teen (13 years and over) by the ESRB.

The scenes are futurist. The player has to eliminate aliens by shooting at them. He/she has an arsenal of weapons at his/her disposal that can be found on the ground along the way or that become available after having eliminated his/her enemies. The latter explode into hundreds of little green fragments and disappear after they've been hit. There are no close-ups. Participants found this game very interesting.

The children who tested the game said that the information written on the packaging (text and images) was satisfactory. However, they said the game should be recommended for use beginning at ages 10 or 11.

#### ***2.3.2.5- Aidyn Chronicles : The First Mage (Nintendo 64)***

*Aidyn Chronicles : The First Mage* is a role playing game which is unveiled bit by bit. The player finds out what his/her missions are by speaking with people s/he comes across. The game is rated Teen (13 years and older) by the ESRB.

The character fights with blade like weapons in an arena with either humans or creatures. The life span of the characters is illustrated with a coloured strip. There are no close-ups. The participants didn't find the game interesting. The players didn't like the drawings, the music, the combats and found the story confusing.

The players said that the game contained little violence. They found the ESRB rating satisfying. One of the participants recommended that the recommended age be dropped to ten years of age. The others suggested the age of fourteen, not because of the violence which they found practically non-existent, but because of the complexity of the game.

### **2.3.2.6- 007 *The world is not enough* (Nintendo 64)**

Marc, 10 years old « I don't know how to catch the girl, I tried to hit her, to shoot her with a gun but it didn't work! ».

*007 the world is not enough* is an action game featuring a new adventure with the famous James Bond. It is rated Teen (13 years and older) by the ESRB.

The player is armed and often has to kill his enemies in order to complete his missions. He has different gadgets and gets to use various weapons during the course of the game. Some have sighting tubes to enable the player to aim more precisely. There are no close-ups. You don't see people with injuries. The characters fall and disappear.

The participants found the game very violent. There is a vast array of weapons and gadgets. The player often has to kill his adversaries. Participants were interested in the game.

The children who tested the game said that the information written on the packaging (text, images) was satisfactory. However, one of the families suggested that the recommended age be dropped to 9. The others suggested 12 or 14.

### **2.3.2.7- *Twisted Black Metal* (Playstation 2)**

*Twisted Black Metal* is an action game in which the player attempts to win a contest. The characters are psychologically unbalanced and they go head to head in an arena. It is rated Mature (17 years and over) by the ESRB.

There are many vehicles and explosions. The scenes are far back and there aren't any close-ups. The players can run over people on foot for no particular reason. There is no

blood. Each vehicle has its own specific weapon. The player has to kill the other characters to get to a superior level. This game was found to be very interesting.

The children who tested the game found that the information on the packaging (text, images) was satisfactory, even very much so. One of the participants even thought that the game was less violent than he had believed. All the participants said that the game was very or enormously violent. However, all suggested that the recommended age be dropped to 13 or 14.

### **2.3.2.8- *Unreal Tournament* (Playstation 2)**

Max, 12 years old « This game is fun but when you kill someone, you see body parts going in every direction, which is disgusting. The weapons are powerful but with the sniper, it's hard to aim well».

*Unreal Tournament* is a quake-like action game. The objective is to complete different missions by eliminating your adversaries. It is rated Mature (17 years and over) by the ESRB.

The scenes are realistic. The player shoots at characters by using a weapon sometimes equipped with an eyepiece. The victims wriggle with pain when they're hit before falling and disappearing. The game has a varied weapon arsenal that the player gradually picks up as the game moves on. There are close-ups. The game offers different modes such as death match, domination or assault. The participants showed interest.

The children who participated found the information on the packagings satisfying and also found that it reflected the violence contained in the game. They all said that the game was very or enormously violent because of all the killing. However, all of them recommended that the minimum age be dropped to 13 or 14.

### **2.3.2.9- *Perfect Dark* (Nintendo 64)**

Jérémie, 12 years old « Perfect Dark is far too realistic. The blood stays on the walls or on the ground (...) the enemies don't disappear right away and that gives us the chance of shooting at them if they made us miss our objective. »

Perfect Dark is a quake-like game. It's about a young female spy who has to stop aliens from invading the earth by completing various missions. It is rated Mature (17 years and over) by the ESRB.

The scenes are realistic. The player shoots at characters by using weapons sometimes equipped with an eyepiece to have a better aim. The victims fall and disappear. Blood from the victims stays on the ground and on the walls. It's possible to deactivate the sight of blood. There are no close-ups of injuries and faces. When the player is out of bullets, he can fight with his wrists. The participants showed great interest.

The participants found that the game was very violent, even extremely so. The French instruction booklet hides the images on the back of the packagings. Once you remove the booklet, the families found that the information was satisfactory and reflected the type of violence contained in the game. They found the ESRB rating adequate but nevertheless suggested that the minimum age be dropped to 12, 13 or 14.

#### ***2.3.2.10- Conker's Bad Fur Day (Nintendo 64)***

Gab, 11 years old « This game is fun but it would be better if it wasn't so vulgar. I don't think parents should buy this game for their children if they're younger than 11 ».

*Conker's Bad Fur Day* is an action game starring a squirrel who has to go home and save his friend who has been kidnapped by a monster. The environment and the characters are animated. It is rated Mature (17 years and older) by the ESRB.

The squirrel is a mercenary and is a fan of sex. He is often vulgar. The moral values are dubious even if the game does not consist in shooting anything that moves, as in other games. There are a few scenes where killing is present. There's blood, you see severed heads, bodies in shreds where you can see guts and brain. The participants found the game interesting.

The players found the game very violent. However they recommend a minimum age of 12 because the characters aren't human. One mother made the following comment: "I'm a little depressed because my sons like this game whereas I find it too violent."

### **2.3.3- Conclusion**

The tests reveal that the information on the packagings and the ESRB ratings are generally satisfying. The tolerance level of children towards violence is higher than it is for parents. All recommended that games rated Mature (17 years + ) should be available for twelve and over. The quality of the design, the intensity and the realism of the action scenes arouse more interest than violence. Since we tried out the games as well, we think that the ESRB ratings are adequate.

## **2.4- Our investigation of stores**

Based on the comments of parents and children and our analysis of the packagings, we decided to continue our study by visiting various console video game rental and retail stores.

### **2.4.1- Methodology**

We developed an evaluation grid and a questionnaire for employees (Please refer to appendix F).

We visited ten stores that sell console video games and ten stores that rent or sell them. All are on the island of Montreal. In certain cases, we visited stores that are part of the same chain to determine if their sale and rental policies are consistent.

### **2.4.2- Retailers**

#### **2.4.2.1- Customers**

In most of the stores we visited (eight out of ten), their customers are mainly between the ages of 17 and 35. Only *Zeller's* and *Toys'R Us* are more family oriented. At *Toys'R Us*,

parents buy Nintendo products for their children and people between 17 and 35 go for Playstation and XBOX products.

#### ***2.4.2.2- Games on display***

The majority of stores (six out of ten) have games on display supplied by company representatives. These games are either the latest products or the ones that sell the most, generally rated E (Everyone) or T (Teen) and sometimes M (Mature). Only *CompuSmart* occasionally puts certain games on display if consumers specifically ask for them. No store changes the games they have on display depending on the day or the hour. A child can therefore see a game on a store TV screen that is not recommended for his/her age group.

#### ***2.4.2.3- Information concerning the ESRB rating system***

Few retailers offer written information on the rating system. Only *Toys'R'Us* and *Future Shop* post information on a board situated below the games out on display. The information shows the ESRB ratings along with the recommended age as well as a few descriptors. The information made available at *Toys'R'Us* is adequate because along with the explanations on the ratings, there are posters on the walls and a brochure at the check-out counter that explains the ratings. The *Toys'R'Us* head office is responsible for this initiative. Sometimes the *Canadian International Digital Software Association* (CIDSAs) or companies such as Nintendo send documentation pertaining to the ESRB.

#### ***2.4.2.4- The popularity of the system with consumers***

According to the employees of stores where the clientele is family oriented, such as *Toys'R'Us* and *Zeller's*, consumers are familiar with the rating system. This doesn't seem to be the case in stores where the customers tend to be older. According to the employees of *CompuCentre*, *CompuSmart* and *Future Shop*, their customers don't know the rating system as well. It's worth noting that most customers are adults buying games

for themselves. They're probably not worried about the violence these games might contain.

#### ***2.4.2.5- The popularity of the system with employees***

In nine of the stores we visited, the salespeople know of the existence of a rating system without necessarily associating it with the ESRB. In a *Future Shop* store, an employee who was asked seems to have a vague idea and answered that it "didn't interest him or his customers".

#### ***2.4.2.6- Access to violent video games***

Children can buy a game not necessarily recommended for their age by themselves in half the stores. One of the salespeople at *CompuSmart* said the following : « *we don't restrict a consumer's freedom here* » and at *Compucentre* another employee said that «*there is no policy forbidding the sale of video games to children* ». All stores permit the sale of a video game to a child, even if it's not recommended for his/age group, if the child is accompanied by an adult. On occasion certain salespeople have attempted to dissuade them (*CompuCentre* and *Radio Shack*), but to no avail. Stores that are family oriented have a stricter policy. *Toy'R'Us* and *Zeller's* refuse to sell to children under the age of 17 unless they have a parent's authorization.

Furthermore, at *Zeller's* and *Radio Shack* video games are set up in a locked glass cabinet and consumers have to ask an employee for assistance if they want to get a game.

#### ***2.4.2.7- Questions concerning violence***

Only *Zeller's* and *Toys'R'Us* said that parents ask information pertaining to the violence in the games they're buying for their children. In other stores, people seldom or never ask any questions on that subject.

#### **2.4.2.8- Conclusion**

Parents that shop in family oriented stores make sure they know about the violence in the video games they're purchasing. Moreover, these stores' policies are strict because children cannot buy games rated M (Mature) unless have a parent's authorization or are accompanied by an adult. ESRB ratings are known and adhered to. Policies are far less severe in stores where customers tend to be older. Even if employees are familiar with the rating system, they don't give out any written information and let children purchase games that are not recommended for their age group. Furthermore, games rated M (Mature) are sometimes put on display at any hour of the day.

#### **2.4.3- Rental outlets**

Rental stores, in exchange for a few dollars, lease out consoles and video games to children and adults. If you take a look at the numbers, this market is particularly dynamic. Indeed last January, the *Video Software Dealers Association* announced that their revenues, generated by video game rentals in the United States, had increased by 36% the first week of January as opposed to the first week of 2001. This means 22,6 million dollars \$US compared to 16,6 million dollars \$US the previous year. Out of these 22,6 million dollars \$US, 1 million dollars were attributable to *Grand Theft Auto 3* (PlayStation 2), which represents in total 9,3 million dollars in rentals since its launching in America on October 3<sup>rd</sup>. Please note that this game is rated M (Mature) by the ESRB, which means it's designed for an audience of 17 and over.

After having spoken with children and having been on various video game websites, we noted that some children have the habit of renting video games not recommended for their age groups. We investigated rental outlets to obtain comments from employees and especially to find out if children have access to violent games.

#### ***2.4.3.1- Customers***

Rental store customers consist of children, teenagers and adults. Parents of children who are 6 years old and over mostly rent games compatible with Nintendo. Teenagers and adults rent games compatible with other consoles.

#### ***2.4.3.2- Games on display***

We noted that four out of ten businesses put games out on display. Customers can try them out in exchange for amounts that range from 2\$ per half-hour to 6\$ an hour. The games that are available are rated E or T and sometimes M if a customer requests a specific game. The games that are rated M are removed as soon as this particular customer leaves the store, but a child can sometimes walk in while the adult is trying out the game. At the *Centre vidéo jeux & ordinateurs*, customers try out games rated M before buying or renting them but rarely play with them in the actual store because these games are often more difficult and more time consuming than the other games. No business takes the day or the hour into consideration when deciding what game to put out on display.

#### ***2.4.3.3- Information concerning the ESRB rating system***

No store gives out information on ESRB ratings. This is a considerable shortcoming. Employees say they never received any documents explaining the rating system.

#### ***2.4.3.4- The popularity of the system with consumers***

In seven of ten businesses, salespeople think that customers don't know about the rating system. According to a *Centre vidéo jeux & ordinateurs* employee, certain parents are familiar with the ratings and still rent games that are not suitable for their children.

#### **2.4.3.5- The popularity of the system with employees**

In nine of ten businesses, employees know the rating system without necessarily associating it with the ESRB.

#### **2.4.3.6- Access to violent video games**

We noted that six out of ten businesses rent films as well as console video games. This seems to create some confusion because two employees from *Superclub Vidéotron* and *Blockbuster Video* think that video games are regulated by the same laws as movies. Therefore, they said they didn't rent video games to minors because it's against the law. These two stores have an internal policy pertaining to restrictions in the rental of video games. Employees cannot rent out video games to children if they don't have the recommended age. At *Blockbuster*, the minimum age flashes on the screen (T-13, M-17) to attract the attention of the employee so that the age of the child is verified. At *Superclub Videotron*, only games rated M are in the computer system. Six of seven employees that were interviewed say that a store policy forbids them from renting video games to children who don't have the minimum required age. The seventh employee didn't know about the store policy and knew even less about the rating system.

At *DVDO* there is no store policy, but parents can ask that a note be put in their file mentioning that no violent games be rented to their children. Most of the time, the employee is the one who makes a judgement call and decides to phone the parents or not or to rent games to kids s/he knows. At the *Centre vidéo jeux & ordinateurs*, all children have a file with their name, date of birth, information as to where parents can be reached and restrictive notes that parents can add. When in doubt, the parents are called or the child has to provide identification. A child accompanied by an adult can rent anything and this goes for all ten stores.

*Microplay* has no store policy pertaining to setting limitations on the rental of video games. Three employees say that they suggest games for their own age to kids when these children want to rent a video not recommended for their age group. An employee

said : «I don't rent games to kids if they're too young but I don't know what my co-workers do ».

Some of the kids who tested games for Option Consommateurs and who are younger than 13, admitted having rented games not suitable for their age group (Example : *Perfect Dark* rated M for 17 and over) in one of the *Superclub Vidéotron* stores. Furthermore, the comments from children on the Internet seem to corroborate this information. Therefore, 90% of comments on *Bad Fur Day* (Nintendo 64) which is rated for 17 and over, came from kids between the ages of 11 and 14. We spoke with one of the players who said: « In Saint-Hyacinthe, there's a rental store called *Club Vidéo Vision*. I'm 12 years old and I, like all kids who go there, can rent games for Nintendo and Playstation that are for 18 and over ».

#### **2.4.3.7- Questions concerning violence**

In seven out of ten businesses, people sometimes ask for information on the violence in video games. According to the *Centre vidéo jeux & ordinateurs*, 50 % of parents who buy games ask questions, but rarely those who rent. In three of the ten businesses, people never ask any questions pertaining to violence.

#### **2.4.3.8- Conclusion**

Parents are less worried about violence when they rent games as opposed to buying them. Certain rental stores have control systems in place ( files, age that flashes, restrictive notes) to check if the game kids want to rent is suitable for their age group. These initiatives are unfortunately not applied by everyone. What's even more a cause for concern is that children get their hands on unsuitable games even when these policies are in place. Employees are familiar with ESRB ratings but no information is given out to consumers. This, according to us, is a major problem to the extent that children and parents who don't know the exact age group that corresponds to the ESRB rating, have no way of finding out unless they ask an employee, which doesn't seem to be common practice.

## CONCLUSION

The popularity of console video games is growing. The increase of realistic scenes and the improvement in technologies confirm that video games aren't only for children and young adolescents but also for adults. Result : There are products on the market that contain violence and that are not suitable for children. Manufacturers, parents and the government therefore have the responsibility of protecting them. Knowing that consumers rely on three elements (texts, images and ratings) to find out if a game contains violence, it is essential to supply consumers with pertinent information. The survey, the analysis of packagings and the tests revealed that parents seem reasonably satisfied with the information written on the packagings. Unlike European rating systems, the ESRB is recognized and systematically applied by all manufacturers. The system suffers from an important lack of information because manufacturers don't indicate an age on the packagings and it's often difficult to evaluate exactly how much violence there is in a game simply by reading its description or by looking at the images. Making a few improvements would be a good idea because close to half of parents found that some games were more violent than they had originally believed.

Despite the fact that the majority of the people who were surveyed would like to see government regulations on video game labelling, we don't think this is the best option. We believe that it would be better to recommend to the video game industry that they improve their labelling by mentioning among others, the required age for each video game category.

Furthermore, retailers continue to sell and rent video games rated M (Mature) to children under 17. Certain stores have taken measures, such as a parent's authorization, opening a file, restrictions or a flashing visual warning that shows the age group, but this isn't the case for all the stores we visited. Children however continue to be able to get their hands on games not recommended for their age group, especially in rental stores where parents

don't systematically exercise a certain control. The majority of employees who sell or rent video games know about the rating system. However, according to the survey, few consumers (13 %) speak with employees. Therefore they have less of a chance of understanding the ESRB rating system. The problem is more obvious in rental stores where there is no information on the rating system.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Option Consommateurs recommends :

- Improving the current ESRB rating system : systematically indicate the recommended age group and increase the number of descriptors on packages.
- An information campaign to sensitize the Canadian population to the rating system, in order to protect children and guide consumers in their purchases or rentals.
- A systematic broadcasting of information explaining the rating system in stores and especially in rental stores, with the help of posters, brochures, etc.
- The implementation of a committee bringing together publishers, distributors and consumers in order to discuss the stakes involved in video game violence and to evaluate consumer complaints. If a rating is deemed inappropriate, the committee would invite the publisher to justify their selection and if need be, to rectify it. The committee could also provide publishers with an evaluation grid that gives access to definitions and procedures used by the ESRB to rate games. This way consumers could be certain that the rating system is dependable and could make comments or object if they don't agree with a specific rating (by of course using the same guidelines). This committee would ensure that the interests of consumers dominate over those of the video game industry.

- Finally, a standardization of store policies pertaining to the sale and rental of video games with the passing of a law which would impose fines on retailers who sell video games to children who are not of the right age group as per the ESRB ratings.

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## **Web sites**

### **General information**

[www.reseau-medias.ca](http://www.reseau-medias.ca).

[www.idsa.com](http://www.idsa.com)

[www.igda.org](http://www.igda.org)

### **Rating systems**

[www.esrb.com](http://www.esrb.com) (North America)

[www.oflc.gov.au](http://www.oflc.gov.au) (Australia)

[www.sell.fr](http://www.sell.fr) (France)

[www.elspa.com](http://www.elspa.com) (Great Britain)

## **RESOURCES**

### **IDSA (INTERNATIONAL DIGITAL SOFTWARE ASSOCIATION)**

The IDSA is a business organization that represents companies that publish video games. They represent the industry in Washington with a policy, rights, intellectual property as well as regulations as to content. The president, Mr. Douglas Lowenstein organizes the E3, the huge video game business fair that takes place in Los Angeles every year.

1211 Connecticut Avenue NW, Suite 600

Washington DC, USA

20036

Telephone: 202-833-4372, Fax: 202-223-2401

### **CIDSA (CANADIAN INTERNATIONAL DIGITAL SOFTWARE ASSOCIATION)**

Founded in 1994, the Canadian International Digital Software Association brings together the major Canadian video game manufacturers, software designers, distributors and retailers. They encourage the development of Canadian software by applying pressure to gain a positive response pertaining to taxes and regulations. Furthermore they provide information on video software instructions, drawn up by the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB), in the United States, and encourage their members to have all new products rated by the ESRB.

**Director :** Harvey Nightingale

178 North Meadow Crest

Thornhill, Ontario

Telephone : (416) 483-5228

Fax : (416) 483-4441

**ESRB (ENTERTAINMENT SOFTWARE REVIEW BOARD)**

They provide consumers with information on the content of interactive video games and entertainment computer software as well as on the recommended age groups.

**Director :** Arthur I. Pober

845, Third Avenue

New York, New York

10022

Telephone: (212) 759-0700

Fax: (212) 759-2223

**RSAC (RECREATIONAL SOFTWARE ADVISORY COUNCIL)**

The RSAC developed a rating system in 1994 that proposed age categories as well as a thermometer type image indicating a violence, nudity and language level on a scale from 1 to 4. In 1999, the organization merged with the ICRA (Internet Content Rating Association) whose objective is to protect children from potentially damaging content and to defend the freedom of expression of suppliers.

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**IGDA (INTERNATIONAL GAME DEVELOPERS ASSOCIATION)**

The IGDA is an international association for game designers.

600 Harrison St.  
San Francisco, California  
USA, 94107  
Telephone: 415.947.6235  
Fax: 415.947.6090

**Director for the Province of Quebec : Jason Della Rocca**

4977 Orléans  
Montreal, Quebec  
Canada, H8Y 1Y6  
Telephone: 514-822-1190  
Fax: 514-822-1186

## APPENDIX A - RATING SYSTEMS

### ▪ NORTH AMERICA



#### YOUNG CHILDREN (3 YEARS +)

The content is suitable for children of three years and up and does not contain any elements likely to be offensive to parents. These games are not violent.



#### CHILDREN AND ADULTS (6 YEARS +)

The content is suitable for children six years and up. They contain a bit of violence, burlesque humour and familiar language.



#### ADOLESCENTS (13 YEARS +)

The content is suitable for teenagers who are 13 years old and up. Games with this rating can contain some of the elements mentioned above, but that are more violent and realistic. The language can also be violent, crude, even vulgar, and the games can also contain suggestive scenes.



## **YOUNG ADULTS (17 YEARS +)**

These games are suitable for people 17 and older. Their content can be more violent, the language more vulgar than the games rated “T”. They can also contain erotic scenes.



## **ADULTS ONLY**

These games are for an adult audience only. There can be very violent or sexual scenes. These games should not be sold or rented to minors.

The following descriptors concerning violence and language can be found on the back of the packagings of those games. Other notes are available but are not relevant to our current study.

### **Animated Blood and Gore**

### **Animated Blood**

### **Blood**

### **Comic Mischief**

### **Violence** (Scenes or activities containing violence)

### **Mild Lyrics**

### **Strong Lyrics** (Profanity and explicit references to sex, violence, alcohol, or drug use)

### **Mild violence**

Descriptors that have been discontinued but which can still be present on the market :

**Animated violence**

**Realistic violence** (violence, realistic images)

**Realistic Blood and Gore** (brutality and blood, realistic images)

**Realistic Blood** (blood, realistic images)

**Mild animated violence**

**Mild realistic violence** (some violence, realistic images)

▪ **ENGLAND : EUROPEAN LEISURE SOFTWARE PUBLISHERS ASSOCIATION (ELSPA)**

The European Leisure Software Publishers Association or ELSPA was created in 1989. They provide publishers with a document which enables them to rate their games by answering a series of questions pertaining to their content. The ratings are for information purposes and there are four categories: 3 years and up, 11 years and up, 15 years and up and 18 years and up.



▪ **FRANCE : SYNDICAT DES ÉDITEURS DE LOGICIELS DE LOISIRS (SELL)**

The SELL was created in 1995. Their rating system divides the suitability of games into age groups. These ratings go from adults only to “for everyone” as well as the ages of 16 and 12. An update was done in 1999. Before then, the packagings read “recommended for use beginning at age... » or « for ... ». These were changed to stricter formulas.



Each category has a different colour, which increases visibility and therefore understanding. Green is for games suitable for all, blue for twelve year-olds, orange for 16 year-olds and red is for adult games only. These logos have to be a minimum size and have to be on the back of all game packagings. This standard is not always respected. Moreover, a complementary label that reads “forbidden for people under 18” is put on the front of games designed for adults.

▪ **GERMANY : ENTERTAINMENT SOFTWARE SELF-REGULATION BODY (USK)**

The USK has existed since 1994. Their rating system includes five categories ranging from « for all » to 18 years old, 6 years old, 12 years old and 16 years old. The logos are yellow, except for the one for 18 years old and over, which is red. Games that are too violent cannot be sold, nor can there be any advertising of those games.



▪ **AUSTRALIA : OFFICE OF FILM & LITERATURE CLASSIFICATION (OFLC)**

This rating system includes five categories, accompanied by explanations printed on the packagings and which appear in all advertisements: (G) **General** (suitable for all ages); **General (8+)**; **Mature** (M 15 +) (suitable for young people of 15 and over); **MA Restricted**: Games that are put in this category are reserved for young people of 15 and over. There is more violence than the previous category. **Refused classification**: These games may not be sold, rented, exhibited, displayed or advertised.

Furthermore, the ratings come with explanations that describe the main elements which justify their classification. These explanations are similar to the notes provided by the ESRB. For example: Moderate/humorous horror, depictions of mild animated violence, etc. These markings appear on the packagings and in the advertising.

Appendix B - Questionnaire (french and english) and Environnics Research Group Report, C - grid used to evaluate packagings and a list of the 45 video games, D - List and photographs of the 10 video games that were tested, E – Evaluation grid used to test vidéo games are available only on the hard copy version.

**APPENDIX F - QUESTIONNAIRE AND A LIST  
OF STORES THAT SELL AND RENT CONSOLE  
VIDEO GAMES**

**NAME OF STORE:** \_\_\_\_\_ **NAME OF EMPLOYEE:** \_\_\_\_\_

**DATE :** \_\_\_\_\_

**VIDEO GAMES THAT ARE DISPLAYED**

**Yes**

Playstation 2                       Gamecube                      Other

XBOX                                       Nintendo 64

**No**

1.     **For what age group are the games that are out on display and available to try out?**

2.     **Do the games that are displayed to try out vary, depending on the hour of the day?** (Example : When the children are in school, the games that are displayed are more violent)

Yes                       No

3.     **Information on the ESRB?**

**THE VIDEO GAME RATING SYSTEM**

1.     **Who generally purchases or rents the games?**

2.     **Are there many parents who ask for your advice on video game violence?**

Yes                       No

3.     **Are people familiar with the ESRB rating system?**

Yes                       No

**4. Information provided on the ESRB rating system.**

Yes       Poster or ad       Brochure       No

**ACCESS TO VIOLENT VIDEO GAMES**

**1. Can children buy or rent video games that are not recommended for their age group ?**  Yes       No       Yes, with an adult

**2. What do you do when a child wants to rent or buy a video game that is not recommended for his/her age group ?**

## **STORES**

1. **Toy's R Us** (7200 Louis H. Lafontaine)  
Large surface area toy store
2. **Future Shop** (7200 Bd des Roseraies, 470 Ste Catherine West)  
Large surface area store specializing in electronics
3. **Compu Centre** (Galeries d'Anjou, Centre Eaton)  
Store that specializes in computers and in video games
4. **Zeller's** (Galeries d'Anjou)  
Retail store
5. **Radio Shack** (Eaton Centre, Complexe Desjardins, Place Ville-Marie)  
Store that specializes in electronics. Sells Sony video games only
6. **CompuSmart** (1195 Place Phillips)  
Store that specializes in computers and in video games

## **RENTAL STORES**

1. **Blockbuster Video**, (10 577 Pie IX, 4501 St-Denis, 5655 avenue du Parc)  
Movie and console video game rental store
2. **Superclub Vidéotron**, (5253 avenue du Parc, 1330 Mont-Royal East)  
Movie and console video game rental store
3. **DVDO**, (2477 Mont-Royal)  
Movie and console video game rental store

4. **Microplay**, (4528 Jean-Talon East, 1843 Mont-Royal East, 4976 Queen Mary)

Store that specializes in renting and selling console video games and DVDs

5. **Centre vidéo jeux & ordinateurs**, (1180 Bélanger East)

Neighborhood store that specializes in renting and selling console and computer video games