

**New screens and young people:
crossing times and boundaries what roles do they play in their everyday life**

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Abstract

New information and communications technologies have become extremely dynamic. While content in the past was more or less controlled and regulated, it is now more and more free to access, and increasingly independent of any formal institutional framework. Images on screens, which used to be viewed on different platforms in specific locations and at more predictable times, now cross through space and time, and this particularly for the younger generations. Some questions arise in this context: what is the role and what are the effects, for example, of film content and video games on young people? What role does rating systems play with respect to these young people and their parents? In order to answer such questions, we need to understand their needs, expectations and skills. Some consider young people to be passive, easy to manipulate, unaware of their values and entirely lacking in critical thinking skills. Others see them instead as active users, capable of using knowledge and competencies. Given our objectives, we chose a qualitative approach designed to take young people's everyday environment into account in the construction of their relationships to on-screen images. Family interviews (semi-structured interview guides), logbooks and digital video cameras were used to gather information in the families. Discussion groups were held with young people and parents separately and evaluation groups with young people aged 14-16 were held in our research facilities. Answers to such questions about the effects of images were found to be complex and full of nuances, despite the fact that there are some who would want simple yes or no answers that support their views.

"This invention will produce forgetfulness in the minds of those who learn to use it, because they will not practice their memory. Their trust in *writing*, produced by external characters which are no part of themselves, will discourage the use of their own memory within them."

Plato, Pheadrus, 275b, 300 B.C.

"Our minds have been corrupted in proportion as the arts and sciences have improved."

Rousseau, J-J. Discourse on the Arts and Sciences, 1700 A.C.

Introduction

New information and communications technologies have become extremely dynamic. They have invaded our everyday life in many different forms, and now provide highly accessible, flexible, interchangeable audiovisual content. While content in the past was more or less controlled and regulated, it is now more and more free to access, and increasingly independent of any formal institutional framework. Images on screens, which used to be viewed on different platforms in specific locations and at more predictable times, now cross through space and time, and this particularly for the younger generations. Some questions arise in this context: what is the role and what are the effects, for example, of films and video games on young people? What role does film classification play with respect to these young people and their parents?

In order to properly investigate such questions, we need to consider young consumers of these images as active subjects moving in evolving environments under the influence of constantly changing new technologies. We have to better understand their needs, expectations and skills, and grasp the specific contexts in which they live. With whom do they share these contents? At what times and in what places? Above all, how and for what purposes? We need to see how young consumers integrate such images and relate to different discourses in their daily lives as they are influenced by their relations with their parents and friends. We have to understand the values and the identities that young people have and develop, as well as those that are imposed on them. This will permit us to analyse consumer practices that both set them apart and make them part of a community in relation to families and peers. Some consider young people to be passive, easy to manipulate, unaware of their values and entirely lacking in critical thinking skills. Others see them instead as active users able to interpret, judge and choose, and, consequently, capable of using knowledge and competencies.

Answers to such questions about the effects of images are complex and full of nuances, despite the fact that there are some who would want simple yes or no answers that support their views. *However, assuming that young people are competent and have skills does not eliminate the need for **social responsibility** on the part of institutions and parents.* The content on these new screens, their increase in numbers and their growing accessibility makes it more important than ever to remain culturally and socially informed.

A history of communal thought

A historical overview of the various discourses on the role of new technologies in society whether it be for example radio in the early 20th century or television in the fifties shows that discourses are often constructed around the idea that new media and its content have a *direct* effect on the psychology of

individuals and their social behaviour. Every new technology often gives rise to the same fears: it will make people more aggressive, apathetic or hyper sexualized, and upset the established order. Media consumption is also thought to have negative effects on human physiology. Finally, the cultural value of content carried on new media is often considered to be of poorer quality than that conveyed by earlier media (Wartella & Reeves, 1983; Drotner, 1992).

Rarely utopian and very often catastrophic, such forms of discourse have in the past, as we have seen with Plato or Rousseau for example, contributed to both common sense opinions and some academic traditions, and it has to be admitted that they are not much different from the discourse in our present society. Between pessimistic paranoia, and idealistic optimism, fear and hope, social discourse, like scientific discourse, shapes thought with fuzzy, ambiguous contours.

If one was to briefly summarize the theories (Anderson & Bushman, 2001) that try to understand and explain the role, effects and various uses of media these could in general be divided into three types:

- ⊕ Research that focuses on **the effects of media independent of its content**, and considers that the fact that less time is spent on other activities (family interactions, reading, sports, etc.) has an effect on health, social and family behaviour (Greenfield, 1984; Valkenburg & Van der Voort, 1995; Pool, Van der Voort, Beentjes & Koolstra, 2000);
- ⊕ Research that looks at **the effects of media and its content**, and supposes that there is a direct causal relationship between media content and young people's cognitive, social and emotional development (Nathanson & Cantor, 2000; Engenfeld-Nielsen, 2004; Escobar-Chaves, Tortolero, Markham, Low, Eitel, & Thickstun, 2005; Brown, Halpen & L'Engle, 2005);
- ⊕ Research that sees media consumption as a social practice and considers that **cultural contexts and users' active roles are essential to such an analysis** (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974; Arnett, Larsen & Offer, 1995; Sorensen Holmes & Jessen, 2000; Anderson & Busman, 2001; Williams & Skoric, 2005; Jonhson, 2005).

We were particularly attracted to this latter approach because it takes users' active roles into account. While research very often underestimates users' competencies and paints a picture of a helpless, vulnerable victim, the third approach attributes to users and those close to them responsibility for their media consumption and construction of the meaning of images. A rather simple-minded question: "What do images do to young people?" can thus be converted into a more complex problem: "What do young people do with media and media content?"¹

Research Objectives

Our present study is based on the *general premise* that media and media content do not determine the

¹ As previously mentioned, this does not deny the need for social responsibility on the parts of institutions.

historical, social and cultural development of young consumers, but it does contribute in a significant way to the very essence of that development.

Our specific *primary objectives* illustrate this general premise. Our research was thus intended to enable us to:

- 1 Explore the effects of new screen images on young people based on the use they make of them and the meanings they give them in their everyday environment and in family and social interactions.
- 2 Understand and validate the legitimacy of parents' and children's perceptions with the quality of content and visual cultural products in young people's environments.
- 3 Investigate how young people develop critical thinking skills with respect to images, and how they understand and use the notions of content effect, youth protection and media education.

Methodology

Given our objectives, we chose a qualitative approach designed to take young people's everyday environment into account in the construction of their relationships to on-screen images. This methodology being an *ecological* type approach to understanding media consumption. We developed a series of data collection tools that provided a sufficiently large bank of information to achieve these research objectives and support our arguments.

Following *exploratory interviews* initially conducted to validate our theory and develop our methodology, we embarked on a series of three distinct stages:

1. **Family interviews** lasting around two hours, at which we met with parents and children in their homes and familiarized ourselves into their everyday environment. A *semi-structured interview guide*, logbook (to be filled over a week period) and digital **video cameras** (for young people to create videos on the topic) were used to gather information from the families.
2. **Discussion groups** were held three weeks later with young people and parents separately but in different groups at our university research center, at which we discussed their media consumption practices and thoughts about film and video game rating systems.
3. **Evaluation groups** with young people aged 14-16 were created so they could assume the role of evaluators who had to analyse over a three weeks period and rate with specifically designed grids three different action films and two action video games.²

A total of 78 young people and adults, 31 girls and 25 boys, 12 mothers and 10 fathers participated in

² The titles we used were among the most popular and representative of the genres mentioned by young people. In the end, in compliance with ethical rules applying to research involving minors, we chose the films *Aurora*, *Domino* and *Final Destination 2*, and the games *Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow* and *Call of Duty 2: Big Red One*.

this research. Some young people participated in more than one stage of the research (family interview and evaluation group), but played different roles in each case.³ Their age ranged from 8 to 16 years old. While the sample was reasonably large for a qualitative study, it cannot purport to be representative. Instead, its purpose was to make sufficient exploration possible to be used as a point of departure for future surveys, assessments, and educational and awareness programs. The interviews and discussion groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim. By converting the information into this form, we were able to classify, categorize and subject it to *discourse analysis*. In all, we analysed 40 hours of interviews constituting 600 pages of transcription, and viewed 15 hours of video recordings.

Research findings

Films, video games and related practices play essential roles in constructing the two social worlds in which children develop: the family and the peer group. In the family, while films and video games contribute to construction of a collective or even community dimension in family life, they also make it possible for each family member to set himself or herself apart from the others by constructing individual identities, family roles and different cultures. In peer groups, films and video games are used to create a feeling of belonging to the group, internal social cohesion and a common shared culture.

Films and family life

One of the most frequent models concerning films involves their role as catalysts in family life. Family members build routines and ritualized activities around films, and these habits help to define and construct shared practices that make a family a family. Like a "family meal," watching a film is for many people a practice that creates structure, unity and a shared culture. This does not involve only watching films together, but also talking about them. Both practices are situations in which meaning is created: the meaning of films is constructed both by shared practices and by conversations that circulate in everyday family space. Comments, evaluations and even family prohibitions, as well as the supporting reasons, become pedagogical tools. Through films and discourse about them, family values can be expressed and transmitted.

These images also have a role in defining individual specificities and different cultures that interlace within a single family (e.g., parents vs. children, boys vs. girls, small vs. big, father vs. son, mother vs. daughter, young people's culture vs. adults' culture). They make it possible for the family to operate, parents to play their roles and children to grow and make the transition, with more or less conflict, from

³ The participants were recruited in the urban and suburban area of Montreal, Canada through (1) popular events such as festivals; (2) University programs; (3) parents' associations and consultations with teachers. This provided us a reasonable diverse number of participants from varied socioeconomic background.

the family to the world outside. As factors uniting family members, such images also give rise to confrontations and trigger the negotiation of individual tastes. Negotiations related to the choice of a film become interactions through which we *learn to cope with others*. Choosing films leads to compromises between the preferences of the child and the pedagogical principles of the adult.

Researcher : Do you sometimes rent movies?

Maria : We often rent movies.

Stephanie : We have a lot of movies upstairs, but they're mostly Marguerite's movies.

Maria : Childish

Pauline : Yes, childish.

Stephanie : And I know them by heart.

Researcher : And your sisters listened to them when they were young so...

Pauline : Yes.

Researcher : One after the other.

Maria 13 years old, Stephanie 10 years old and Pauline 8 years old are sisters.

Video games and the family unit

Video games are usually introduced into the family through social links, most often through people, such as peers, who are outside the family network. However, adult family members, such as the father, spouse or another close family member, sometimes introduce such games. In the family unit, family members *who play video games* can share a symbolic world, which allows them to weave and strengthen their relations and special alliances (e.g., father and children, older and younger child, brother and brother, brother and sister, sister and sister).

However, video games we found, more than films, often mark the borders between young people's and adults' culture. It is sometimes difficult for parents to share the activity with their children. Often, they do not have the skills necessary to master or explore video games. The activity then becomes a symbolic barrier between two generational cultures and establishes video game playing as an indicator of identity. When the game is "too complicated" or there are too many buttons, the child becomes the expert. Most parents' ignorance in this area considerably limits their ability to control or evaluate such products for their children. They thus often find themselves at a loss when faced with the world of video games. Yet it is important to note that, no matter what the degree of mastery by parents, video games activate parents' roles as educators, decision-makers and position-takers.

Researcher : That looks fun. Are you good at it?

Daniel : Yeah. I was never defeated.

Researcher : (Laugh) That's when you play alone or with someone else? Because you can play that game against someone else.

Daniel : Well it's too easy when you play against someone else. Like against my father.

Peter : Oh no. I don't play anymore. I'm tired of it.

Daniel : You're just really bad at it.

Researcher : You play with your father?

Daniel : Oh yeah. But he's really bad.

Peter : Oh no. I can't do anything against him. I get scored 10 points. Like 10 – 0... pffff. There are too many control buttons, it's hard. For me, games have to be simple. Lets say I'm from the arcade generation. So for me ding, ding, ding and it's over.

Peter in his 40's and Daniel 11 years old are father and son.

The role of films and video games in the transition to the world of peers

Ties established with peers remain a fundamental aspect of the cultural context of media consumption. Moreover, it is specifically because they are integrated into both family life and peer groups that films and video games become tools used in the gradual transition from home life to the broader social universe.

Elizabeth : Yes. We don't want them to watch movies like Kill Bill. They weren't home. Actually, they were spending the week at one of our... At my aunt's house. So, during that moment we don't have any control over them. Naturally.

Researcher : Yes.

Elizabeth : But in any other case we watch them. We try to pay attention as much as we can.

Paul : Yes, but most of all, like you were saying about the movie content, some movies like Scary Movie are comedies. And Mathieu always tries to make us rent movies like this one but we don't want to, because we think that these movies are pretty stupid.

Elizabeth : Too stupid... That's it.

Researcher : Ok.

Paul : So we base our evaluation more on the content of the movie.

Elizabeth and Paul in their late 30's are husband and wife.

Young children watch films and play video games mostly chosen by their parents. Parents go with their children to the movie theatre to see films that they have chosen themselves, and rent games for shared recreational activities. Parents often accompany their children in this way until they can go to the theatre on their own, choose films by themselves and play video games alone or with their friends. The opinion of peers then gradually enters into family negotiations. Parents are no longer the only "deciders" of the appropriateness of media products. They have to deal with "what everybody else (i.e., the peer group) is doing." They have to take into account their own responsibilities to their children's culture. Parents also cannot underestimate how important it is for their children to have access to the same images as the others and be able to see them like the others and, possibly, with the others so as to integrate into and become part of young people's culture, their culture.

Films and video games in the world of peers

Among young people, there is a strong desire to belong to the group and share the same cultural references. Like music and fashion, *certain* films and *certain* video games define such cultural membership. They are not only vectors of shared practices, but also topics of conversation among friends. Not sharing them would amount to being excluded.

Michael : Expressions... He didn't use a lot of them. There's maybe [the expression] "I got you" from Brice de Nice. But that's all.

Jeremy : That sucks!

Michael : It did suck actually.

Researcher : What?

Michael : The expression of...

Jeremy : Brice de Nice.

Researcher : "I got you."

Michael : Because this expression was pretty popular at school. Everyone was boring me with that. I don't know how many times I heard: "I got you! I got you!". And then we saw the movie, he told me: "My God! That movie sucked!"

(...)

Jeremy : I have the same tastes as my friends.

Researcher : Almost the same?

Jeremy : Yeah almost.

Researcher : But do you ask them questions on things like that? For example, did you ever talk about Brice de Nice at school?

Jeremy : I only wanted to see it you know. Everyone was talking about it you know. I had to see the movie one day.

Michael in his 40's and Jeremy 11 years old are father and son.

A classification system developed uniquely by adults might be tempted to overlook the symbolic value of films and video games and their functions as social gathering points and tools in the construction of a common shared culture. Video games play a special role in the world of young people even though they regularly give rise to concerns among educators and families. On one hand, there is the attraction of virtual and imaginary worlds that can be explored alone or in a group. Indeed, in the margins of video games, there are the original forms of sociability, such as get-togethers with friends and competitions, which should not be underestimated. On the other hand, there is the self-esteem and pride in the technological skills and cognitive abilities that accompany successful exploration. The user becomes not only a subject on whom the rules of the game operate, but also a player who takes an important active role in the success of the undertaking. Use of video games can also be a means of constructing self-esteem and membership in a peer group.

Evaluation of media products: the central role of family values

Through its choices and consumption of films and video games, every family applies its own scale of values and takes responsibility for its educational and pedagogical choices. Films and video games are sometimes viewed from a broader educational perspective, such as in the context of learning a new language, history, mathematics and some facts of life. Indeed, some parents mentioned to us that video games had a positive influence on their children with respect to motor skills, dexterity and reflexes.

Paul: [...] So if we start playing at a video game, there's a form of learning in it. You can develop reflexes, improve hum... Your hand and eye coordination, well it can also make you improve your basic

reflexes. And maybe some games can make you develop and learn more things.

Paul is a father in his late 30's.

However, a number of parents said that they wished to develop their children's critical thinking skills in relation to their choices of films and video games outside the home and away from parental control.

Nonetheless, our findings on young people's evaluation of products showed most of them had integrated family values well, as they have the need to control consumption of images on the new screens. Thus, when they are made responsible for controlling content, they consider that respecting family values is necessary and essential to assessing the appropriateness of images for children younger than themselves.

Violence and sexuality require care and attention

Some parents and young people said they were troubled by images concerning violence, respect for order and justice in society, sexuality and eroticism for both films and video games. In the evaluation groups, young evaluators indicated that films and video games should have a certain level of morality and intellectual quality. Elegance, sensitivity and appropriate clothing and manners were important factors in their evaluation of media products.

Rosalie: You know, they're not just swearing in this movie, it's vulgar. It's not pretty words. And you can't find good values in this movie. Like, it's only showing to people how fun it is to kill people and do that kind of stuff. And there are not values that you want show to your kids like I don't know courage, or things like that.
Rosalie, 14 years old, talking about the movie Domino.

The young people, who fully accepted their roles as evaluators with social responsibility to younger people, were aware of how the images on new screens affect the popular culture of young people and, consequently, became judges as rigorous as some parents.

Violence in films (explicit vs. implicit)

Physical, verbal, sexual and psychological violence is the criterion most often used by young people and parents to pass judgment on a film. However, our young evaluators considered that the consequences on viewers were different depending on whether the violence was explicit or implicit. According to our young evaluators, it is brutal and upsetting to see depictions of violence that are so clear and precise that they leave nothing to the imagination, but such scenes are extremely common and unoriginal in films today, even when they include scenes of death, shootings and fights. Portrayed in an explicit manner, such scenes of violence do not produce the same reactions of fear and discomfort as scenes in which the viewer can only infer actions and consequences. An image that shows unequivocal violence

leaves no room for imagination because it defines the limits of the action: what happens is what the viewer sees on the screen. Our young evaluators said that implicit violence created greater reactions and distress because it gave rise to many different interpretations.

Denis: You know, at one point for example, the little girl gets burned, you know, like her step mother takes something from the fire place, puts it in the fire and burns her. But we can't see what happens when the little girl gets burn, but we can understand what's happening. You understand and you can even imagine more things.

Denis, 16 years old, talking about the movie Aurore.

Violent images: proximity and narrative realism

Realism is also an important factor in evaluating an image, and is inherent to the notion of proximity, which refers to the degree to which the viewer identifies with the story, events and characters. According to the young evaluators and the parents we met, watching a film and playing a game takes on a whole new dimension when the images do not form only an imaginary or fictional narrative, but encroach on everyday life, real life. Young people consider that a cultural product that anchors some elements (e.g., scenario, actors, actions, location) in reality and that resembles their everyday lives has a more profound effect on their sensitivity and emotions.

Andrée: There's a lot of blood in this movie, and a lot of disgusting scenes too, but it's so much unrealistic that it didn't scare me at all.

Andrée, 16 years old, talking about the movie Final Destination.

Rosalie: There's always a part of your body, well a part of your brain that is going to react, even if you don't notice it. If you kill bugs that are from another planet, in your head, you know that it isn't real. But if you kill people, real people who exist for real. Not that they really exist but you really have the feeling that they do exist (...) You feel like it's someone like you. You enjoy it less. Well normally I think you enjoy it less.

Rosalie, 14 years old, talking about the video games in general.

Thus, images of a real story or a social or cultural, past or present historical fact affect the audience more than those of an extremely violent film or video game in which there is no realism. The group interviews and evaluation grids show clearly that scenarios and scenes showing exaggerated violence do not always result in great discomfort, concerns or unpleasant impressions, but often rather in laughter, mockery and contempt. However, our young 14-16 year old evaluators themselves admitted that such films can sometimes have destabilizing or traumatic effects on their younger peers. They considered that prudence is required, and did not believe that caricatured or exaggerated violence should be seen by young people of all ages. Some young people, owing to their level of maturity, social origins and education, might not be able to grasp all the subtleties of a scenario or distinguish exaggerated from real violence. Supervision by parents and older children was thus seen as essential.

Violence and frustration in video games

For children and parents familiar with the world of video games, thoughts about violence and its consequences are more complex and highly nuanced. Evaluating the appropriateness of a video game requires taking into account a number of aspects: the degree of realism of the game, the kinds of actions required, and the player's psychological stability and level of involvement in the scenario. Young video game players are not mere spectators linked by peripherals. The game places the individual in a specific relationship with the cultural product, and that relationship makes it possible to create an original scenario, characters, actions and situations.

Video games are by definition a fictional world. Killing human beings is not like killing "skeletons" or "pigs riding horses." Generally, though in some video games young people "kill," "commit assault" and "violate" laws and social conventions, the actions are not perceived in the same manner as in a film or in reality. A number of young people thus affirm that "a game is a game." For them, the recreational dimension of video games can partly mitigate some possible consequences of violence. However, some parents and our young evaluators reported that the violence in video games can sometimes affect young users' behaviour. The joy and pride of winning and meeting some goals can be followed by frustration, aggressiveness, depression and worry about the failure. A young evaluator told us about her brother's aggressive behaviour after playing the controversial game *Grand Theft Auto*. A mother said that her son criticized her driving after he had played *Need for Speed*, a car race video game. Yet another said that her son had neglected his schoolwork to spend more time playing video games.

While the most widespread discourse is that video games themselves set limits on the forms of behaviour that they encourage, in our society there is a strongly held thesis that video games are responsible for some asocial forms of behaviour. The fact of thinking about possible relations between video games and behaviour in these terms is one of the arguments used by our young evaluators and parents in the way they classified video games.

Images and sexuality

The themes of violence and sexuality were at the heart of our respondents' reasoning when they evaluated films and video games. While there were many references to violent scenes, and such scenes were described in detail by both parents and young people, we found few detailed descriptions of sexual scenes. Our respondents made brief, modest reference to "making love," "showing her breasts," and "taking off her shirt." When we asked questions on this subject, the discourse became problematic, ambiguous and often contradictory. Parents' arguments became vaguer; children stammered and did their best to avoid making comments. The uneasiness with respect to references to sexuality is a datum

in itself and indicates that sexuality remains a taboo, at least in discourse. Speaking of violence and describing horrific scenes with almost clinical precision proved less problematic than referring to sexuality, even in a general manner.

Elizabeth : But I think that it might be worse to see a sexual act in a scene than a gun shot scene. I don't know.

Catherine : For my part, it doesn't bother me. I don't mind them seeing a sexual act. It bothers me more if they see people shooting each other. It bothers me more.

Researcher : Because it really teaches family values.

Catherine : Because they are true acts of violence while making love is going to happen to them one day anyway.

Elizabeth : No but...

Catherine : For me it's like, for me you know it's true, it's intolerable to shoot each other. While making love, I find it very acceptable.

Elizabeth in her late 30's and Catherine in her late 40's are mothers.

Conclusions: the ecology of consumption

Violence, sexuality and vulgar language remained primary concerns of our young evaluators when they were asked to assess the appropriateness of images on new screens. When we take the point of view of young people and parents and observe their everyday lives, we can see how media and media content can be sources of concern but also means of learning forms of behaviour, values (both positive and negative since they are intimately related to basic values and social consensus), knowledge, skills and tools for constructing identity and cultural belonging.

Young people use some media especially for recreation, excitement in a simulated or controlled environment (video games), experimenting with emotions such as fear in fictional situations (films), having the feeling of belonging to a shared "youth" culture, developing and strengthening social networks, experiencing competition, facing challenges and freeing themselves of authority and family values.

Media and media content are thus active parts of their culture; they do not determine the historical, social and cultural development of individuals, but rather play an active and significant role in that development. It is precisely this "fact" that places the spotlight on quality control and appropriateness of multi-media content.

The film and video game rating system is of course the result of a complex institutional assessment process. However, this process is sometimes invisible to parents. The ratings indicated on cultural products seem to erase the details and process that they are supposed to summarize and show. Some parents think, for example, that sexual content is necessarily linked with the 13+ rating, while others speculate that this rating is instead linked with portrayals of violence and drug use.

These conjectures about ratings also seem linked with the many different rating systems circulating and

crisscrossing in consumer spaces. For example in Quebec, a number of television channels show the Quebec rating *plus* another warning at the beginning and throughout some programs. Audiences can also find three different ratings on some video cassettes and DVDs, such as American versions of films: those of the *Régie du cinéma*, the Canadian Home Video Rating System and the American ratings. The different ratings can create confusion.

Yet, we should not conclude that the rating system and other classification bodies is meaningless or useless. Film ratings operate less like a highway code that defines what is permitted and prohibited, and more like a tourist guide that draws users' attention to some products while giving them the freedom to choose them or not.

Myriam : Because it's another indicator actually. The rating on the movies are more indicators.

Sylvie: [...] Personally, I look a little bit at the ratings but it only gives me a general idea and I'll have the final word on what we chose. Based on my values and after that on who I am and what I want for my children first of all.

Elizabeth : On the video game, on the movie. We need to have more information.

Myriam in her late 40's, Sylvie in her mid 40's and Elizabeth in her late 30's are mothers.

Rating systems also lead adults to wonder about the possible impact of films and video games on themselves as parents and educators, on their children and their children's needs, identities and membership in a specific culture, and on society's basic values. Parents thus have to reassert their roles constantly, for they are confronted with the cultural world of their children and their children's peers. They are constantly rebuilding foundations and proving their relevance in a world of media that is always changing owing to new forms of behaviour, visions of the world, thoughts, fashion, etc.

Our study shows that film ratings are not necessarily taken at face value. The audience reserves the right to perform a different evaluation, which defines a line of thought and challenges the institutionalized classification. For parents and children, the evaluation can result in an authorized "transgression" of the rating and the societal values that it represents.

The fact that ratings are not complied with in a mechanical manner could raise questions about their real effectiveness. Yet, the system's strength lies precisely in the gap between the classification and the decision, between the evaluation of others and one's own action. Indeed, this gap guarantees that adults do not abandon their responsibility for emancipating and educating children and ensuring respect for family values.

The film classification system in Quebec has made it possible to construct shared knowledge and a culture of prevention well anchored in the family, and many parents have great competency and knowledge with respect to films. This enables them to form an idea about a film from only a few details or rapid images, and even simply by zapping, scanning film reviews and consulting synopses. Parents'

experience makes it possible for them to make decisions and resolve disputes concerning the appropriateness of media products for their children.

However, in the realm of video games, parents who are not video game players admit that they do not know much about video game classification systems. Yet, game ratings do not escape the culture of prevention. Even if parents are not aware of all the subtleties, many say they need a control mechanism adapted to the new media and its cultural context.

Indeed, in this case there is also confusion. The video game rating system does not operate in terms of age as does that associated with films. Instead, it works in terms of stages of development: early childhood, teen, mature, adults only, everyone, etc.⁴ Ratings are supplemented only by symbols of aspects of the video game (or film), such as violence, sexuality, coarse language, etc. Finally, the rating is by an American organization, and the fact that it is different from their usual cultural system of reference could contribute to parents' lack of knowledge about this specific form of classification.

Most parents are unfamiliar with new technologies and do not feel sufficiently competent to master the world of video games. The small amount of knowledge that they have acquired is not sufficient. Unlike their film literacy, their familiarity with technology does not seem to be developed enough to make up for this absence of knowledge or permit them to find their way around that world and assert their expertise and authority over their children. Failing a better solution, they thus tend to either be stricter in their application of the classification system of a technology that they do not master and cannot assess because they lack the expertise or adopt a "laissez-faire" attitude.

Current video game ratings should be translated into another "language" because parents do not understand them well enough. Moreover, the necessity for developing an accurate video game rating system is situated between knowledge acquired and knowledge missing. Parents require a system for better orienting and guiding their children in territory that is, for them, uncharted with respect to both technology and culture.

Young people take a rather critical approach when examining the content of images on the new screens. According to them, a classification system has to be related to other indications from their own experience. There is thus a need to add and develop new references compatible with the cultural and social world of young people.

Parents and young people interviewed expressed a need for a descriptive film and video game classification system that would take a number of dimensions into account, such as the level of violence,

⁴ http://www.esrb.org/ratings/ratings_guide.jsp

degree of realism, technical difficulty and narrative complexity. If a descriptive system is established to summarize the content of cultural products, it should contain information that would allow people to make wiser choices and encounter fewer surprises. Terminology that expresses levels with respect to controversial subjects and themes could possibly make it easier to grasp what makes one product more appropriate than another. Descriptive complementary comments are considered strong solutions, and were mentioned by young evaluators and parents in the discussion groups.

However, classification of films should not be confused with that of video games. Films involve linear scenarios while games turn users into players and creators of meaning and scenarios.

While young people have adopted new screens almost instantly, since screens are active components of their cultural and social environment, they nonetheless live between two cultural worlds that are often in conflict: that of their peers, which is more open and often oriented toward transgression, and that of their families, which is more defensive and anchored in strict family values.

Underestimating the need for a new approach would be to deny the primary feature of changes in both society and individuals, namely, a process of co-determination between media and culture. This entails that young people's development and well-being, as well as their cognitive and social fulfillment, identity and vision of the world, are not dependent only on their age, but also and above all on the wealth of the social interactions specific to their experience and the mediation of surrounding semiotic mechanisms. Language, images, information more or less carried in technology, texts, etc. are not simple backdrops, but artefacts that make a difference in the progressive construction of children as competent members of the community.

For institutions concerned with protecting young people, such as the *Régie du cinéma*, it would thus be wise to consider the pertinence of information and intervention strategies, for example, in schools, so as to take into account young people's most pressing needs with respect to media appropriation. Developing critical thinking and awareness training for older children with respect to their younger peer's or sisters' and brothers' consumption of images would, as our research has shown, be a promising avenue to explore, especially if it were combined with involvement of parent associations aware of the stakes in protecting young people.

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