Australia | **Council**
for the Arts

Catherine Cornish
Committee Secretary
Standing Committee on Communications,
Information Technology and the Arts
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Ms Cornish

Thank you for the invitation to Mr David Gonski to make a contribution to the inquiry into the future opportunities for Australia's film animation, special effects and electronic games industries. I am replying on Mr Gonski's behalf.

The Australia Council acknowledges the many values of Australian film, animation, special effects and electronic games to our community, our economy and our place in the world.

Australian creativity manifest in the arts is enormously valuable in a variety of ways - our creativity in our expression of ourselves as individuals, families, regions and as a country. Our creativity also helps us to solve challenges, deal with our history and is our insurance for our futures.

Nine out of ten Australians when surveyed place a high or fairly high value on learning about new things (93%), being intellectually stimulated (89%), and having some creative skill (88%). Only two-thirds of the population place the same value on having some sporting skill (68%)[i].

The Australian games industry produces (at $100 million in export revenue and 23% growth in local market) enormous opportunity for Australia. The current and potential economic benefits of the industries of concern to the Inquiry are clear.

The Context
Australian artists have a long history of participation in the Australian film, animation, special effects industries, and more recently, in the electronic games industry.

The work of the Australia Council has traditionally complemented the film, animation and special effects industries and Council has supported, at some stage, the careers of many artists who work in these fields. Throughout its history the Australia Council has also supported artists wishing to engage, experiment and create work using emerging technologies, through its various Boards and Committees and in the late 1990s through the establishment of the New Media Arts Board.

While public funding in the fields of film, animation and special effects has been well established in Australia both through federal and state governments, the emerging field of interactive electronic gaming has not to date enjoyed this kind of support.

Further, the Australian market is characterised by a substantial deficit ($508 million) in audiovisual trade.

Electronic Games and Art
Of all the creative media under consideration by the Standing Committee in this Inquiry, it is probably the emergence of the electronic game that has been most commercially driven – this being a product of its time of development and its technological complexity.

Despite this, Australian artists have over the last decade begun to use the electronic game form to examine, explore and comment on our culture. They are not creating commercially viable computer games however the artistic outcomes sit firmly within the game genre. To distinguish them from commercial electronic games, American academic Tiffany Holmes applies the term 'art game' when describing interactive works by artists, and argues that they do one or more of the following: challenge cultural stereotypes, offer meaningful social or historical critiques, or tell stories in a novel manner.[ii]

The interactive or digital game form is increasingly attracting attention worldwide among artists. The increased processing power of computers and game consoles is making it possible to create interactive games which have a cinematic feel, and a complexity in narrative, game-play, character and visual design unimaginable a few years ago.

The 5th International Digital Arts & Culture Conference[iii] held recently in Melbourne (May 2003) devoted an entire week to discussing and debating the impact of computer games on contemporary art and culture around the world. Artspace has held symposia on the computer game form in Sydney and dLux Media Arts will produce *plaything* as part of their annual FutureScreen program with a focus in October 2003 on digital games.

Screen culture organisations and events such as the Adelaide International Film Festival in 2003 are introducing electronic game programming streams, acknowledging the impact of the electronic game on cinema and other screen-based narrative forms. The Australian Centre for the Moving Image will house one of the world's first public collections of electronic game software and hardware.

The Australia Council can provide the Committee with contact details for these and other key organisations in the field.

Public Funding and Emerging Technology and Arts Practices
The New Media Arts Board is witnessing an increase in the number of artists, especially artists of the electronic game generation, seeking to explore the electronic game form and anticipates this will continue in coming years. Over three rounds of its *Run_Way* Young & Emerging Artists Program (a Federal Government Initiative) several young artists have been supported to attend the myriad of conferences, academic symposia and 'flesh meets' that are springing up all over the world to explore and debate the impact of electronic games on contemporary arts and culture.

It is in this context that the New Media Arts Board believes that the Australia Council will develop a similar relationship to the electronic games sector as it has developed with those of film, animation and special effects. This is not as a major player in the development of those industries, but rather an important incubator of emerging talent and innovation among individual artists.

Nurturing Potential

Australian artists are well placed, and recognised as having strong skills and theoretical grounding, to contribute to electronic game developments and debates about the technology worldwide. The engagement of the tertiary sector through arts, communication, media and computer engineering and IT departments has been strong. Centres at RMIT, UNSW and QUT[iv] have been established to conduct research and development of technology for human/computer interfaces, interactivity and virtual and mixed reality.

These are the new and emerging technologies - interactive cinema, immersive virtual environments, or massively multiplayer on-line games – to which artist will turn their attention in the future. How artists will respond or develop works using these technologies cannot be predicted and it is therefore important for the Australia Council, primarily through its New Media Arts Board, to remain as responsive possible to shifts in arts practices involving emerging technologies.

Funding and regulatory programs need to be structured in such as way that allows for flexibility in supporting the new forms and practices that will emerge among these industries. Growth strategies will require collaborative effort across government including agencies for the arts, film, information and communications technologies and industry development. Arts support alone will not enable significant industry growth.

Federal and state funding agencies should be supported and encouraged to broker partnerships between each other and with the tertiary and private sectors to respond to emerging trends and technologies where appropriate.

Infrastructure

Significant investment in infrastructure is likely to be required. In the new media arts field there are substantial barriers to a broader engagement with new technologies by both artists and audiences due to limited access to technology, the high level of obsolescence associated with technology, and the lack of affordable access to high bandwidth (both for home and business).

As part of the Myer Inquiry into the Contemporary Visual Arts and Crafts recommendations, the establishment of a national technology loan facility was proposed. The Federal and State Governments have not funded this recommendation however the need for equitable access to new technologies will remain for the foreseeable future, both in terms of the creation and presentation of new media art.

Training

Key to future growth and innovation in these industries will be a diversity of pathways for practitioners to become involved in the industries. The education and training system needs to be supported in providing these different pathways from film

and television training institution, through new media studies at fine art schools, to IT and computer science or engineering courses.

The Australian Council commends the Committee's attention to the interrelationship between film, animation, special effects and electronic games. We would be happy to provide further input and also acknowledge the considerable contributions made by the Australian Film Commission.

The social and cultural benefit of these industries lies in their capacity to harness and extend Australian creativity- to enrich our capacity to create Australian perspectives of ourselves to ourselves and to the world. This inquiry needs to be located within the context of the support of Australian culture, creative industries and innovation in a whole of government perspective.

In special effects and games we recognise that some practice exemplifies professional arts practice. Photography animation and film were once new technologies considered to be mere curiosities and not the potential palette for art and excellence.

The further opportunities for these industries are many fold. Australia's inventiveness and cost competitiveness- demonstrated by the Australian film production sector- can attract international investment and customers. At the same time the nurturance of domestic production can support the development and expression of distinctively Australian creativity.

It is hoped that the Committee will consider the relevance of issues such as intellectual property policy, regulation and support for broadband industries, pay television and trade negotiations to this inquiry.

We believe that it is important that domestic and international policy settings take into account the value of these industries to Australia's economic, social and cultural success.
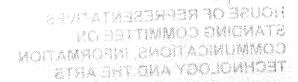
Yours sincerely

Lisa Colley
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Policy Communication Research

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[i] *Australian and the Arts* Federation Press 2001
[ii] Tiffany Holmes from the Department of Art & Technology at the Art Institute of Chicago, Melbourne DAC 2003 Conf Papers (page 59) or see http://hypertext.rmit.edu.au/dac/papers/Holmes.pdf
[iii] see http://hypertext.rmit.edu.au/dac/papers/
[iv] see www.interactiondesign.qut.edu.au, www.icinema.unsw.edu.au, www.iii.rmit.edu.au/vrc/