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What are the functions of game review boards? Are they effective? Why are they controversial?

Like television, films, books and magazines before them, video games became a focal point of censorship, regulation, and moral panic. Video games such as *Death Race (1976)* and *Custer's Revenge (1982)* raised a debate on the level of appropriateness of adult-themed content presented to young audiences. This led to the first noteworthy legislative action in 1993, due to *Mortal Kombat (1992)*. Within the game, the player "could kill his opponent through a variety of moves called "fatalities", which included ripping his spine out" (Miller, 2010, p.707), and it was this graphic content that sparked a widespread moral panic within the media and the adults of the time. 20 years later, video game content is still a controversial topic, as was seen throughout the Brown v. Entertainment Merchants Association of America court case in 2011. The state of California attempted to restrict the sale of violent video games, however, it was dismissed "as unconstitutional" (Valadez and Ferguson, 2012, p.608) by the US Supreme Court. As a result of the widespread moral panic, there was the creation of review boards across multiple countries to help regulate mature content to their appropriate audiences. The scope of this essay is to detail the function of game review boards, specifically Pan European Game Information (PEGI) and The Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB), along with a discussion on their effectiveness and the controversy surrounding them. Furthermore, this essay will advise on multiple ways to improve the review boards from a collection of scholarly frameworks.

Rating Boards

Within this essay, I shall be focusing on the most popular review boards: PEGI, who are mostly found in Europe and rate products marketed in 38 different countries (Pan European Game Information, 2015); and the ESRB, who operates in the USA, Canada, and Mexico. The ESRB and PEGI both have very similar systems and their process of rating video games are not massively dissimilar. However, they are a multitude of other rating systems from different countries, including Japan, Australia, and Brazil. Their rating systems are as followed, respectively: Computer Entertainment Rating Organization (CERO), which includes 26 content descriptors as well as 5 age categories ranging from all ages to 18+; the Australian Classification Board (ACB) which focuses on 7 age categories; and the Department of Justice, Rating, Titles and Qualification (DJCTQ) with 6 age ratings varying from L (for all audiences) to 18 (Adult Only) (Marston and Smith, 2013).

The prime principle of the aforementioned game review boards is to assist parents in their selection of "appropriate games for their children to play" (Bijvank et al., 2009, p.870).

Parents are able to view the ratings on the game case, generally indicated by an age symbol (See Figure 1-2). Additional information can be found online through the rating boards' website, for example, http://www.pegi.info/en/index/. However, there is a fundamental

EARLY CHILDHOOD
Content is intended for young children.

EVERYONE
Content is generally suitable for all ages. May contain minimal cartoon, fantasy or mild violence and/or infrequent use of mild language.

EVERYONE 10+
Content is generally suitable for ages 10 and up. May contain more cartoon, fantasy or mild violence, mild language and/or minimal suggestive themes.

TEEN
Content is generally suitable for ages 13 and up. May contain violence, suggestive themes, crude humor, minimal blood, simulated gambling and/or infrequent use of strong language.

MATURE
Content is generally suitable for ages 17 and up. May contain intense violence, blood and gore, sexual content and/or strong language.

ADULTS ONLY
Content suitable only for adults ages 18 and up. May include prolonged scenes of intense violence, graphic sexual content and/or gambling with real currency.

Figure 1 - ESRB Age Ratings in 2016
(http://www.esrb.org/ratings/ratings_guide.aspx)

problem with the target and premise of rating boards. Even though studies have shown

parents recognise what the rating boards

are, such as ESRB and PEGI, parents lack

the fundamental knowledge about the

Figure 2 - PEGI Age Ratings in 2015 (taken from annual report)

specific details. *Stroud and Chernin (2008)* have identified that "45 percent of parents did

not know that the ESRB system is composed of both ratings and content descriptors"

(Stroud and Chernin, 2008, p.7). This connotes that nearly half of 150 parents were not

aware of the in-depth details about the rating boards. Even if "62 percent said they were

'very' or 'quite familiar'" (Stroud and Chernin, 2008, p.7) with the ESRB rating system,

parents were not nearly educated enough about what the rating boards consisted of in

order to make informed decisions for their children.

Types of Ratings

By analysing the different review boards, it is evident there are two different types of

classification systems, age categories and/or content descriptors. These are classified as

either evaluative or descriptive. Evaluative ratings "such as age labels, make

recommendations regarding who should or should not be exposed to a specific game"

(Bijvank et al., 2009, p.871), and are usually found on the front of game packaging. PEGI's

age ratings consists of 5 different categories, 3+, 7+, 12+, 16+ and 18+ years, as opposed to

ESRB's use of 6, Early Childhood (EC, 3+), Everyone (E, 6+ and 10+), Teen (T, 13+), Mature

(M, 17+), Adults only (A, 18+). In contrast, descriptive ratings "contain information about the

content of a media product [and] often indicate the presence and/or intensity of violence,

sex, profanity and or other controversial elements" (Bushman and Cantor, 2003, p.131),

- **Alcohol Reference** - Reference to and/or images of alcoholic beverages
- **Animated Blood** - Discolored and/or unrealistic depictions of blood
- **Blood** - Depictions of blood
- **Blood and Gore** - Depictions of blood or the mutilation of body parts
- **Cartoon Violence** - Violent actions involving cartoon-like situations and characters. May include violence where a character is unharmed after the action has been inflicted
- **Comic Mischief** - Depictions or dialogue involving slapstick or suggestive humor
- **Crude Humor** - Depictions or dialogue involving vulgar antics, including "bathroom" humor
- **Drug Reference** - Reference to and/or images of illegal drugs
- **Fantasy Violence** - Violent actions of a fantasy nature, involving human or non-human characters in situations easily distinguishable from real life
- **Intense Violence** - Graphic and realistic-looking depictions of physical conflict. May involve extreme and/or realistic blood, gore, weapons and depictions of human injury and death
- **Language** - Mild to moderate use of profanity
- **Lyrics** - Mild references to profanity, sexuality, violence, alcohol or drug use in music
- **Mature Humor** - Depictions or dialogue involving "adult" humor, including sexual references
- **Nudity** - Graphic or prolonged depictions of nudity
- **Partial Nudity** - Brief and/or mild depictions of nudity
- **Real Gambling** - Player can gamble, including betting or wagering real cash or currency
- **Sexual Content** - Non-explicit depictions of sexual behavior, possibly including partial nudity
- **Sexual Themes** - References to sex or sexuality
- **Sexual Violence** - Depictions of rape or other violent sexual acts
- **Simulated Gambling** - Player can gamble without betting or wagering real cash or currency
- **Strong Language** - Explicit and/or frequent use of profanity
- **Strong Lyrics** - Explicit and/or frequent references to profanity, sex, violence, alcohol or drug use in music
- **Strong Sexual Content** - Explicit and/or frequent depictions of sexual behavior, possibly including nudity
- **Suggestive Themes** - Mild provocative references or materials
- **Tobacco Reference** - Reference to and/or images of tobacco products
- **Use of Alcohol** - The consumption of alcoholic beverages
- **Use of Drugs** - The consumption or use of illegal drugs
- **Use of Tobacco** - The consumption of tobacco products
- **Violence** - Scenes involving aggressive conflict. May contain bloodless dismemberment
- **Violent References** - References to violent acts

Figure 3 - ESRB Content Descriptors (http://www.esrb.org/ratings/ratings_guide.aspx)

these descriptors are usually shown at the back of the game packaging. As highlighted in figures 3-4, PEGI has seven categories ranging from violence to gambling (in 2015 the online content descriptor was discontinued), compared to ESRB's 30 more detailed descriptors ranging from language to sexual content.

PEGI's and ESRB's classifications systems are very similar, with minor differences such as the ESRB having more detailed content descriptors. However as previously noted, parents are unaware of what these ratings actually mean, and this cannot make informed decisions. In the case of the ESRB, within multiple rating categories, they have assigned "content descriptors to some games but not others with the same content" (Thompson, Tepichin and Haninger, 2006, p.410). This has led to confusion for parents that look for consistency and accuracy among the information
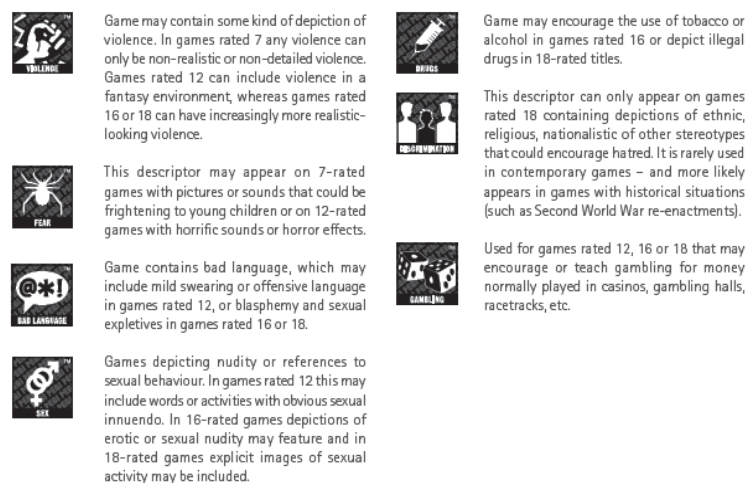
Game may contain some kind of depiction of violence. In games rated 7 any violence can only be non-realistic or non-detailed violence. Games rated 12 can include violence in a fantasy environment, whereas games rated 16 or 18 can have increasingly more realistic-looking violence.

This descriptor may appear on 7-rated games with pictures or sounds that could be frightening to young children or on 12-rated games with horrific sounds or horror effects.

Game contains bad language, which may include mild swearing or offensive language in games rated 12, or blasphemy and sexual expletives in games rated 16 or 18.

Games depicting nudity or references to sexual behaviour. In games rated 12 this may include words or activities with obvious sexual innuendo. In 16-rated games depictions of erotic or sexual nudity may feature and in 18-rated games explicit images of sexual activity may be included.

Game may encourage the use of tobacco or alcohol in games rated 16 or depict illegal drugs in 18-rated titles.

This descriptor can only appear on games rated 18 containing depictions of ethnic, religious, nationalistic of other stereotypes that could encourage hatred. It is rarely used in contemporary games – and more likely appears in games with historical situations (such as Second World War re-enactments).

Used for games rated 12, 16 or 18 that may encourage or teach gambling for money normally played in casinos, gambling halls, racetracks, etc.

Figure 4 - PEGI Content Descriptors in 2015 (taken from annual report)

they have been given. Furthermore, the use of ratings such as age and content labels, leads to video games becoming forbidden fruit for the youth. The forbidden fruit, also called the reactance theory, illustrates that if there is a restriction on consumer's freedom, then it shall "draw individuals to the restricted media" (Bushman and Cantor, 2003, p.136). Forbidden video games for children will become desirable, and for parents, it shall become increasingly difficult to protect them despite the efforts of the rating system.

Rating Process

For the game publisher to acquire an age rating and content descriptors on their game before consumption, the review board must go through a rating process. The review process between ESRB and PEGI are methodically different. For PEGI, it is a four stage process that begins with the publisher completing an online form that is submitted and reviewed. The form consists of a content declaration and a game review, which allows "the administrator to focus on elements of the game which are probable to affect the rating" (Marston and Smith, 2013, p.5). Depending on the rating that is submitted, it is verified by either the Netherlands Institute for the Classification of Audio (NICAM), who categorise games between the ages 3 and 7, or the Video Standards Council (VSC), who categorise games between the ages of 12 and 18. Conversely to PEGI, the ESRB is a self-regulated organisation. Game publishers must submit an ESRB questionnaire as well as a DVD with all the controversial material that has been highlighted in the questionnaire. These are then reviewed by three trained ESRB game raters that "independently assign a rating and series of content descriptors to the game" (Wilcox, 2011, p.267). Once the three raters have reached a consensus, the game is then further reviewed and compared with previous

ratings and games. An important part to note is that these raters are kept confidential, and are not permitted to have any ties to the video game industry.

From the methods described above, it can be argued that there is a thorough process due to the multiple review steps, along with the advantage of raters being confidential. However, there are issues relating to self-regulation, interactivity and the lack of online descriptors. Self-regulation has its issues when it comes to creating ratings, as game developers may alter the content of their games to avoid the "Mature" or "Adults Only" ratings. Primarily, this restricts creative freedom for the platform, due to the fact that "some retailers refuse to carry games intended for adults" (Miller, 2010, p.710). As there is a financial risk involved, there should be a need for full separation between the games industry and the review industry (as recommended by scholars in 'How can it be improved?' section of this essay).

Furthermore, the process of reviewing games only focuses on the information and extracts submitted by the game developer. *Thompson, Tepichen and Haninger (2001, 2004, 2006)* concentrate on the content and ratings of the ESRB in their studies. They have highlighted that the "ESRB raters should play the finished game, including the introduction, before assigning a rating" (Thompson, 2001, p.597). The widespread issue with most game review boards is that they do not account for the actual interactivity of the player; instead, it draws attention to the themes and imagery depicted on screen. In the *Marston and Smith (2013)* study, they found that only "South Korea, New Zealand and the USK in Germany" (Marston and Smith, 2013, p.13) account for game playing during the review process. This connotes

that the two biggest review boards, ESRB and PEGI, do not actually play their games to create a rating.

Intrinsically linked with gameplay, is the lack of online content warnings within review boards. Both the ESRB and PEGI do not account or warn of the interactions that can occur while playing in an online environment. As emphasised by the increased "popularity of multiplayer games and optional multiplayer game modes featuring voice interaction between players [and] the prevalence of profanity in online voice chat sessions" (Ivory et al., 2009, p.459). In addition to online interactions with players, there is also a lack of warning to parents about the use of "additional material in video games by entering codes readily available from video game Web sites" (Haninger, 2004, p.864). With rating boards, not playing the game during their review process and not accounting for online content, raters are unable to give a true representation of what the game encompasses.

How can it be improved?

The controversy of game review boards has been explored by multiple scholars in the game studies field. There have been recommendations and frameworks on how to improve review boards, not just for video games but across multiple media platforms. In *A gameplay definition through videogame classification (2008)*, re-occurring patterns within the rules of video games were identified, and labelled "Gameplay Bricks". These 'bricks' consist of 'Game' and 'Play' and when classified together create 'Metabricks'. These 'Metabricks' were a result of "pure statistical analysis over a 588 video game corpus" (Djaouti et al., 2008, p.6),

indicating they were able to categorise games based on their interactivity and not their content. Similarly, *Jasper, Gareth, and Raphaël (2012)*, emphasised two different ways of categorising a game's content. Similar to current rating systems they "make sense of, and guides the perceived and executed actions as part of a coherent fictional world" (Jasper, Gareth and Raphaël, 2012, p.7), which is denoted as the 'fiction schemata'. The second focuses on "the perceived and executed actions" (Jasper, Gareth and Raphaël, 2012, p.7), which is named the 'game schemata'. By splitting the game's thematic content and its interactivity, this can lead to a game classification that covers every aspect of the game. These two scholarly works focused on new classification frameworks. However, *Bushman and Cantor (2003)* suggested the following improvements according to their findings on the implementation of media rating system: guidance that is easily understood, content information should be provided and public information about the criteria for assigning ratings to media offerings should be readily available. A procedure should also be made for public or consumer review if the ratings are assigned to coders who have a financial stake in the product. Finally, media industries should educate the parents about the rating systems. From the five recommendations made, the education of parents and the ease of understanding should be emphasised the most as this was the recurring recommendation through scholarly works.

Conclusion

To conclude, game review boards attempt to assist in the regulation of video games that are appropriate for younger audiences. however, many issues that have been identified with these methods. The function of the evaluative and descriptive ratings is inherently flawed

due to the confusion it creates for parents, as well as turning games into forbidden fruit for children. Ratings are conducted through a self-regulated process that does not account for the interactivity found within gameplay as well as implications of online content, found through verbal interactions and additional materials downloaded such as 'mods'. There are a variety of scholars that present frameworks which account for both gameplay and thematic content, in addition to others recommending improvements to the existing game review model. The strongest recommendation could be "the development of a single universal system for rating media products" (Gentile, Humphery and Walsh, 2005, p.441). In the long term, with an implementation of a universal rating system across multiple media platforms (television, films, books, magazines, video games), it will lead to less confusion for parents, along with greater efficiency in training raters and parents to use. Most importantly, it will allow for a simpler testing, validating and monitoring process across a single system.

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