

Defenders Of The Video Gaming Realm

ESRB champions for parental control

By Jason White

Parents worry, it's their job. These days one of their particular worries is about video games and the impact playing them has on their kids. Much of the media depicts video gaming as a violent, abusive pastime that is ruining children. But there is a positive side to gaming: it helps with reflexes, develops excellent problem solving skills and, in some cases, is a way for parents to get in some quality time with their child.

The pros and cons can definitely leave a parent confused. This is where the Entertainment Software Ratings Board (ESRB) can help.

A lot has changed since the board's creation in 1994. Tasked with creating ratings for video games according to content and age appropriate materials, the ESRB worked closely with child development, academic and various other child-centric experts along with

consumer research. The ESRB created the first entertainment rating system with two important parts: rating symbols, which provide general guidance for age appropriateness, and content descriptors, short, standardized phrases that provide insight into why a game received a particular rating and may be of interest or concern.

The symbols: EC for early childhood; E for everyone; T for teen;



The symbols, above left, are just guidelines. It's the content descriptors, right, that really tell parents what the game is about in the ESRB system.

M for mature; and A for adult are just guidelines; it's the content descriptors that really tell parents what the game is about. Patricia Vance, president of the ESRB in New York, says the board "found parents didn't notice them [descriptors] and only went by the rating on the front of the box. That rating is just to give parents a gauge of who the intended audience is, not the appropriateness of the game for their child."

Now the content descriptors and the rating are in the box on the back of the package. That way it stands out. It used to be just a line of text on the lower back of the game box.

A NEW METHOD TO HELP

"We also broke down violence four more ways," Vance adds. Violence is broken down by cartoon violence, fantasy violence, intense violence and sexual violence. There are more than 30 descriptors now in order to help parents really get an understanding of what the game contains.

Early on, however, the ESRB recognized that distributing ratings posters and brochures wasn't going to be good enough so it launched the "OK to Play? - Check the Ratings" campaign last fall.

Through this campaign the ESRB created partnerships with all of the major retailers and identified opportunities to integrate the "OK to Play?" campaign into the stores' existing signage and displays. Training was also provided for sales associates along with identifying other marketing channels that retailers can use to communicate ratings information to their customers.

"Eight-five percent of the top retailers, including Best Buy, EB Games, CompUSA, GameStop, Trans World-FYE and others, relaunched their ratings education program in November '03, while Toys R Us, Wal-Mart and a few more will relaunch their

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programs this year, all using elements of the ‘OK To Play?’ campaign,” Vance says.

ONLINE GAMING

Massive multi-player online role-playing games (MMORPG) are the newest form of gaming out there and are played by ages 12 to 50, and by all genders. This is the hardest area to rate because the game itself can be rated T but there is user-generated content, which the ESRB can't monitor. This is an area where the ESRB relies on the publishers and developers to keep on track.

Yvef Blehaut, senior vice president of Atari, New York, has some good news on that front. “The developer is the gate keeper to keep that stuff in line. There are automatic scripting programs that prevent people from typing certain things as well,” Blehaut says.

Most online games have human monitors playing the game to watch players’ conduct to be sure things don't get too far off track. “For our upcoming MMORPG, World of Warcraft, we are hiring hundreds

of game masters to work in the online community and keep things in order,” says Philip O’Neil, president of Vivendi Universal Games, Los Angeles.

Many of the video game publishers and developers work very closely with ESRB to avoid getting a rating the company might not want. “We factor the ESRB in because we want to reach the widest audience; we usually want the E-rating,” says John Billington, senior brand manager for Atari. Publishers can submit bits and pieces during the development process to see where the rating is headed.

This allows the publisher to reassess the game and see whether it needs to be changed or continue on that course.

The ESRB has rated more than 10,000 games since 1994. U.S. Senator Joseph Lieberman has praised the ESRB rating system as the “best entertainment rating system” in the U.S.

WHAT ABOUT THE MATURE GAMES?

Only about 12 percent of all the games created in 2003 were M-rated games. These games get the most press because of the content they contain. However, the majority of games were rated E, 54 percent, and rated T, 31 percent. There are more family-friendly games than anything else out there.

“In the end, nothing is more paramount than having parents involved. No third-party rules or regulations can ever replace that.”

–Philip O’Neil, Vivendi Universal Games

FACTOIDS:

- ESRB rates **1,200** games a year
- In 2003 more than **239 million** computer and video games were sold, almost two games for every household in America
- The average game player in the United States is **29 years old**
- Entertainment software sales total **\$7.0 billion** in the United States
- **50 percent of current gamers** plan on playing more or as much in 10 years

Source: ESRB

There are cases where an E-rating wouldn't be possible as in a video game based on World War II. The violence of the history alone would garner it an M rating.

“As far as the purchasing of M-rated games we found 87 percent of the time parents are involved in buying the game so it's very

critical they take responsibility for the games coming in to the home,” Vance said.

The Interactive Entertainment Merchants Association (IEMA) is also trying to curb the sales of M rated games to children under 17. In a December 2003 announcement, the IEMA said the association would institute a national carding program and identification check at the point of purchase for M-rated games by the 2004 holiday season.

“In the end nothing is more paramount than having parents involved,” Vivendi’s O’Neil says. “No third-party rules or regulations can ever replace that.”

THE RATINGS

Video and computer game rating are much like movie ratings.

There is the letter and then the description of why it has that letter. Here is an easy-to-follow breakdown:

- One percent of the games are rated EC, for early childhood. These games are right for ages 3 and older and the gameplay is very easy with no inappropriate content. This content would be equal to a G-rated film like *Toy Story* or *Finding Nemo*.
- Fifty-seven percent of games are rated E, for everyone. Ages 6 and older can play the games and the content has comic mischief and possibly mild language. It doesn't mean that the game is easy to play. Some E-rated games are very complex and can be frustrating for a young child. This content would be equal to a PG film like *Cinderella Story* or *The Village*.
- Thirty-two percent of the games are rated T, for teen. These are intended for ages 13 and older. There will be mild violence, mild or strong language and suggestive themes. This content is typically the PG-13 films like *Anchor Man* and *Spider-Man*.
- Ten percent of games are rated M for mature and these games are designed for 17 and older. These games generally contain mature sexual themes, intense violence and strong language. This content is equal to an R-rated film like *Scary Movie* or *Gladiator*.
- RP is for ratings pending. This means the game has been recently submitted to the ESRB and the board is in the process of reviewing the title.
- The A-rating is for adults only and no one under 18 should be playing these games. These titles are never sold in a mass market outlet and contain graphic depictions of sex or violence, or both. This content is equal to an X movie rating.



Jason White, Associate Editor of PLAYTHINGS and an avid video game player, is formerly a video game reviewer.