

Australian Computer Society

Policy Statement

On

**VIDEO GAME RATING
RECOMMENDATION**



ICT Professionals Shaping Our Future

www.acs.org.au

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Summary of ACS Position

The ACS believes that current ratings classifications for video games and online gaming do not appropriately reflect or meet the needs of the dominant age group that engages in these activities.

According to the recent IA9 (Interactive Australia) study by the Interactive Entertainment Association of Australia and Bond University, 70+ per cent of Australian gamers are 18 years and over, with the average age of video game players in 2008 being 30.

The ACS is calling for an R18+ classification for video games and computer games to bring them into line with other published media such as films and magazines. The ACS believes the current lack of an R18+ rating classification limits the range of games legally available to adult gamers, while doing little to prevent these users from obtaining illegal games overseas or via the Internet.

At the same time, it has negative impacts for the Australian gaming industry by either banning adult games from being sold in this country or requiring developers and importers to make a substantial investment to modify such games for the local market.

ACS VIDEO GAME RATING POLICY

INTRODUCTION

In this policy document developed by the ACS Young IT Board and approved by the ACS Policy Committee, the ACS seeks to highlight the issues impacting the video and computer gaming sector in Australia. In particular, we explore the issues around introducing an adult R18+ classification for video games.

The argument around explaining rating classifications for games is not new. The Government explored the possibility of introducing an R18+ classification back in the early 1990s, but decided against it for reasons that some stakeholders claim were misinformed and incorrect.

This policy looks at the key demographics of game players in Australia and considers the potential benefits of a change to bring game ratings into line with those applied to other media such as film and magazines.

BACKGROUND

The Interactive Entertainment Association of Australia recently released Interactive Australia 2009 (IA9), a detailed research report showing who plays video and computer games in Australia, their behaviours and demographics. The third study of its kind since 2005, the research involved in-depth interviews with over 1,600 households by Nielsen Research and the final report was published by Bond University's Centre for New Media Research.

IA2009 also found that 68 per cent of the survey group identified themselves as gamers and half of all gamers play daily or every other day.

Despite widely held misconceptions that children are the primary users of computer and video games, IA9 revealed that over 70 per cent of gamers are aged 18 or older and the average gamer has been playing games for 11 years. The average age of gamers in 2008 was 30 years old, up from 28 in 2007 and 24 in 2005. Thus, the average age of gamers is increasing by a greater degree than it would if it was simply following the same set of people, further reinforcing the growing popularity of gaming as an adult pastime. Interestingly, of those surveyed, over half did not realize Australia had no R18+ classification for games [1][2][3].

Given that most gamers are adults, it seems pointless to oppose introducing an adult classification for video games based on the age of users, as has been argued in the past, since children represent a minority of gamers.

Certainly, many gamers are aged less than 18. IA9 reveals that 75 per cent of video games sold in Australia are classified G or PG, thus ensuring that the needs of this group are met.

The Australian Office of Film and Literature (OFLC) is responsible for assigning the appropriate classification to films and videos, computer games and publications in accordance with Commonwealth, State and Territory legislation.

Movies can carry the ratings: G, PG, M, MA15+, R18+ or X18+. However, video games only have the possible ratings of: G, PG, M and MA15+ [4]. As a result of this approach, games that fail to comply with the maximum rating of Australian standards – that is MA15+ – are banned from sale in Australia. The only option for developers wanting to sell unrated games is to remove any content considered to be offensive and then reapply to have their game classified within the existing ratings categories.

Over the years, a total of 30 games have been refused permission to be sold in Australia due to the content they contain. Of those, 18 had their content modified so they could be reclassified to MA15+ [5].

While content modifications have enabled those companies to gain access to the Australian market, smaller companies without the resources of larger game developers might struggle to achieve this outcome. As a nation of small businesses, it is important to recognise that one and two man operations might not have the resources to go into a game to remove content that the OFLC deems unfit for the MA15+ rating.

The IA9 report demonstrates the substantial size of the video game industry, and how pervasive entertainment video games have become, with over 88 per cent of households having some form of video game. The Australian market has grown from sales of less than \$500 million in 2000 to over \$1.3 billion in 2007 and supports over 25 major game studios employing hundreds of software programmers as well as an unknown number of home-based game developers [3].

Gaming is a big business in Australia. In the current economic climate, with share prices a percentage of their former worth and house prices falling [6], one has to ask whether Australia can afford the negative financial impact of banning locally developed games created for the adult market simply because we lack the appropriate rating classification.

With the open nature of the internet and the growth of file sharing [7], gamers who wish to obtain unclassified games can easily obtain a pirated version online. The IA9 report found that each household has an average of 26 video game titles of which one is typically an illegal copy.

The accuracy of this figure is questionable, given that fact that survey participants are unlikely to admit to possessing illegal content. The report suggests four per cent of games are pirated copies; however internet traffic suggests 10 per cent is closer to the mark, and this doesn't account for the sharing of pirated content between friends and family after it has been downloaded. By using a conservative estimate of 10 per cent, and given that the game industry is worth approximately \$1.3 billion per annum (2007), this accounts for around a \$130 million loss in sales.

In addition to piracy and file sharing, gamers can also import unclassified games from other countries where the content isn't banned. The current policy is negatively impacting the economy by limiting the national GDP because these sales are going to offshore suppliers rather than local retailers.

Another argument relates to the categorisation of video games as an art form [9]. By not having a classification for R18+, some might consider that the Government is limiting the 'freedom of expressions' of its citizens. Certainly this is the view of the United States of America, which has enshrined the freedom of expression in the First Amendment to the Constitution and will not ban video games on that basis.

Australia is a signatory of the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) treaty, Article 19 of which states, "Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression." It can therefore be argued that by limiting classification of gaming content in Australia, we are preventing freedom of speech and as such are in breach of the treaty. [10]

CONCLUSION

The current age of those who play video games is 30, a figure which has been steadily rising over the past five years. This alone seems a valid reason to introduce a higher rating to bring video games into line with other forms of entertainment such as magazines and movies.

By banning particular games which fail to meet the maximum standard of MA15+, Australia is limiting potential revenues for the video game industry, since many gamers will turn to alternative sources of supply to meet their needs such as illegal downloads or imports.

The ACS believes that current ratings classifications for video games and online gaming do not appropriately reflect or meet the needs of the dominant age group that engages in these activities. The current lack of an R18+ rating classification limits the range of games legitimately available to adult gamers, while doing little to prevent these users from obtaining illegal games overseas or via the Internet.

The ACS is calling for an R18+ classification for video games and computer games to bring them into line with other published media such as films and magazines.

Resources

- [1] <http://www.ieaa.com.au/research/Interactive%20Australia%202007.pdf>
- [2] http://www.ieaa.com.au/news/pdf/Who%27sGamingandWho%27sNot_0.pdf
- [3] <http://www.ieaa.com.au/research/IA9%20-%20Interactive%20Australia%202009%20Full%20Report.pdf>
- [4] <http://www.oflc.gov.au/>
- [5] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_banned_video_games#Australia
- [6] http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,,23346538-7583,00.html?from=public_rss
- [8] <http://www.heritage.org/research/internetandtechnology/bg1790.cfm>
- [9] <http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=299>
- [10] <http://www.aph.gov.au/library/Pubs/rn/2001-02/02rn42.htm>