

A Parent's Guide to the Video Game Rating System

By S. Ranta

It's a common sight in malls and department stores all over the country. Everywhere kids are begging their parents for the latest and greatest video game. But video games aren't just for kids these days. The video game industry has matured into a market for gamers of all ages, and not every game is appropriate for all age levels. How can parents know if the game they're thinking about buying is appropriate for their child? The answer is simply to read the box. All games sold at retail or advertised on TV or in magazines feature a prominently placed rating by the Entertainment Software Ratings Board.

What is the ESRB?

The ESRB is an organization established by the video game industry to rate games for age appropriateness. It is funded by the video game industry, and is similar in function to the Motion Picture Association of America ratings board for movies. While submitting a game for rating is voluntary, in practice it almost universal for commercial video games. The reason for this being that most retail stores will not sell video games that do not have a rating.

A Short History of the ESRB

When the technical advancements in video game technology in the mid 1990s allowed for more detailed graphics and sound, the issue of violent games such as Mortal Kombat and Night Trap became a concern for the public. This in turn led to politicians addressing the issue, looking to cash in on voter concerns. The video game industry went through a series of hearings was given an ultimatum, either they would create a self regulatory body with a rating system, or the government would establish one instead. This led to many incomplete and competing rating systems being established, before the organization that later became the ESRB was created and became the standard in 1994.

The goal of the ESRB was to create a rating system that would allow for freedom of expression in video games without burdensome restrictions on creativity, such as those that had stifled the movie industry and comic book industries before them.

How the ESRB Rates Games

The ESRB rates video games using material provided by the video game company before publication. The company provides written descriptions and video footage of the materials they think will be the most controversial. This includes material that is in the game's code, but may not be accessible by the player within the game. The company either accepts the ESRB's rating, or it can make content changes to the game and resubmit for a new rating if the original rating does not match the game's target market.

The raters that the ESRB employs are full time employees, and most have a background in child education or psychology. They normally don't play the games that are being

rated, mainly due to time constraints. A long video game might take up to 80 hours to complete with multiple plays through the game required to see all the content.

ESRB Ratings and Content Descriptors

The box of the game has two symbols with the game's ESRB rating. A short version with just the rating appears on the front, and a longer version listing the content descriptors for materials that some might find objectionable is on the back. The ratings are functionally similar to the MPAA ratings that are used to rate movies, with different ratings for different ages. A list of the various game ratings and their MPAA equivalents follows. In addition, there is also a Rating Pending symbol that may appear on advertising material for games that have not yet been rated.

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|------------------------|-------|
| • Early Childhood (EC) | G |
| • Everyone (E) | G |
| • Everyone 10+ (E10+) | PG |
| • Teen (T) | PG-13 |
| • Mature (MA) | R |
| • Adults Only (AO) | NC-17 |

Where Can Parents Find More Information?

Retail stores and web sites where games are sold prominently display the ratings and some of the more common rating descriptors. The complete list of the official ratings and content descriptors are available from the ESRB.com web page.

By taking these ratings and descriptors into account, parents can easily determine whether the game they are considering purchasing is right for their child.