Parental Video Game Attitudes:

Children’s Access to Restricted Video Games

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the Bachelor of Arts degree (Social Science Specialisation) at DBS School of Arts, Dublin

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March 2011
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Acknowledgements

Thanks to Dr Anna Wolniak for the feedback and assistance. All my friends for having patience when the going got tough. Sheelagh for giving me the encouragement to go and push myself. And Rinky for making sure none of my notes were stolen by sitting on them all the time.
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Title

Parental Video Game Attitudes: Children’s Access to Restricted Video Games
Abstract

This study explores the issue of parent’s attitudes towards children’s access to restricted video game content. The research consisted of six participants, two male and four female parents with children under 18. They each completed a self reporting parental style questionnaire followed by an in depth interview. The data was then transcribed and analysed using discourse analysis. Results showed that irrelevant of the parenting style there was a general finding that the children were allowed access to age restricted content. This is consistent with research regarding parents being complicit in providing the restricted content and that age restrictions may not be an effective barrier.
Introduction

The video game market has exploded over the last 30 years and now ranks as the highest entertainment sector in the world. This has resulted in video games being used by vast numbers of young and old alike during their free time. With such a huge market to cater for there are lots of games being produced for all ages and tastes. As they have become part of the mainstream media they are more accepted and used in many varied applications. These applications range from general entertainment such as online interactive games that have many millions of people interacting with each other all over the world, to the America’s Army game that gives an insight and also as acts as a recruitment tool. Gaming world tournaments where people can earn a living as professional players are becoming more common. Outside of gaming the more commonplace uses would be educational with some of the more diverse applications being surgical simulators. Kato (2010) discusses the benefits of their use in health care with specific games developed for evaluating and training doctors in clinical skills. There is evidence (still currently in dispute but mostly positive) that playing games helps with surgical skills. Other areas that are of benefit are during long or painful procedures and for those with disabilities.

Jenkins (as cited in Quart, 2001) considers the study of video games to be a fledgling field, potentially becoming something akin to film studies. Although this opinion may be a decade old there are still many areas of video games that are under researched and prone to newspaper sensationalism. Film has now been received into the public sphere with much of the output being viewed as acceptable, barring the odd title that pushes the boundaries. Obviously this has not always been the case. It has been a bumpy ride with film makers pushing the boundaries resulting in the inevitable media and public outcry against the “video nasty” in the 80’s. Due to the size of the video game market and it’s relatively short life, Jenkins may well be
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accurate in his view of the maturing of the video game market and the associated fields over time. As film, radio and books experienced, it takes time to be accepted in to the public consciousness.

Ratings

With the type of content available varying considerably from those suitable for all to games aimed specifically at adults, there is a need to be able to distinguish between them. To guide the potential consumer towards making a decision that is suitable for the recipient, the different types of games are differentiated with the use of an age ratings system. In Ireland the Irish Film Classification Office (IFCO) is the statutory body that rates all cinema, DVD and video releases in Ireland. They rarely rate video games as Ireland opted to become a member of the Pan European Game Information (PEGI) organisation which rates video games throughout Europe. However, the IFCO can under specific circumstances rate video games as “Under the Video Recordings Act 1989 video games are exempt from classification unless they are deemed prohibitable under section 3 (1) of the Act.” (IFCO, 2011). There have only been a few instances of games being rated by the IFCO with Manhunt 2 being banned due to “unrelenting violence” (News From IFCO, 2007).

The IFCO “believe that adults (i.e. persons over 18) should be free, within the law, to choose what they wish to view.”(IFCO, 2011) and with the acceptance of film and video titles that were previously restricted, many have been allowed to be sold in more recent times reflecting shifts to a more liberal society. This is with the distinction that rated titles carry the relevant age rating that it is appropriate to.
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Currently the PEGI ratings on video games aren’t legally enforceable but most retailers voluntarily enforce the 16+ and 18+ ratings. In the UK the BBFC currently rates the content of video games but this is set to change to the PEGI system which will be legally enforceable by September 2011. The information is supplied to inform and guide the consumer about what is suitable. However contrary to the ideal of an informed consumer making a decision on the suitability of the game, there is a misconception by some that the age symbol is a difficulty rating. Also as the ratings aren’t legally enforceable there is a tendency to ignore the rating altogether.

Of the associated research material available on video games Griffiths (2010) comments that much of the work is on the effects of video games on children and adolescents, even though the 18+ games are aimed at and in theory restricted to an adults only market. Griffiths further suggests that “families may be complicit in buying age-restricted video games for their children” (p. 66) and questions whether the rating of video games works as an effective barrier to restricted content. This compliments the fact that even though certain games are restricted, parents make the decision to allow their children access to them despite the guidelines that are available as previously noted. This indicates an issue with the question of informed purchasing and responsibility. Although the media can be eager to demonise video games, the willingness of parents to concede to the demands of the child undermines the outcry from parents. The main culprit is seen to be the producers of the game rather than ask how the child obtained a copy in the first place. Kline argues (as cited in Quart, 2001) that “children are being made to learn how to be consumers of violence” (p. 52) and yet they are only able to ‘consume’ the violence with permission.
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Violence and Video Games

The violence within video games is subject to much study as they are seen as more immersive than TV. There are concerns of greater effects on those that experience the content within them. This is a central point of the ratings system, that higher rated video games are rated and possibly restricted for a reason. There is a strong chance that restricted video game will have violent content with measurable effects on the user. But this project is predominantly interested with the parental attitudes that enable access for the children rather than the effects on them. However as parents have secondary experiences through contact with their children in buying and consuming video games there is an influence that cannot be ignored.

According to Bösche (2009) there are two arguments for the investigation of violent video game content. The first is that the use of violent video games increases aggression and reduces emapthy. Habitual use affects the individual to the degree that they are more violent and less empathetic partly as a result of desensitisation. The second argument is that violence in video games acts a pressure release valve and Bösche likens it to the rough and tumble style of play of young mammals. The decision to play violent video games is argued as an extension of rough and tumble with the participants able to distinguish between what is real and what is play.

Violence for Violence’s Sake?

Jenkins (as cited in Quart, 2001) who discusses what is taken from the playing of video games, the group of girls took pleasure in beating the boys at their own game. This is contrary to the traditional image of the effects of video games resulting in violent individuals.

Buckingham (as cited in Quart, 2001) in his research with the British Broadcasting Standards Council on violence and media found the children understood that what was portrayed
was not ‘real-life’ and with the result that he “recommended that the government respond to violent media with education rather than censorship” (p. 55).

Fowles (2010) cites the work of Markey and Markey in their discussion of video game violence argue that there are links between aggression and violent video games. This effect was more pronounced in those with a predisposition to violence and little effect on the opposite. This would subsequently mean that aggressive people are aggressive.

**Class Wars?**

Fowles (as cited in Quart, 2001) claims that it is a class issue and argues that those who contest the value of violence on TV and video games are viewing it from a position of highbrow distaste. This is agreed with by Levin (as cited in Quart, 2001) who notes that “there is a marked tendency in cultural studies to apologize (sic) for mainstream media” (p. 57). Whilst these positions have merit they are beyond the scope of this project but this is an area that could be expanded later.

**Media**

With the large increase in dialogue (not always constructive) between the media and the video games market, the level of exposure for the general public has been polarised. The news reports are either sensationalist headline hyperbole or advisory articles promoting the parent to engage with their children and examine what the game content is and its suitability. These two messages are at dichotomous as if a game is restricted then in theory there are only consenting adults viewing the content.
Ferguson (2010) reviews the available literature on video game aggression and concludes that the “current concerns about video games fit into a historical pattern of media-based moral panics.” (p. 66). This could possibly be a reflection of Fowles’ claim that video games are differentiated through class.

**Attitudes**

In attempting to answer the research question it is vital to understand parent’s attitudes, and in particular those that relate to restricted video games. This requires the deconstruction of these attitudes and how they are put into a ‘frame’. Attitudes are defined by (Abercrombie, Hill, & Turner, 2006) as a “relatively stable system of beliefs concerning some object and resulting in an evaluation of the object” (p. 21). To understand parental attitudes requires the breaking down of the evaluation that is built upon their beliefs that frame this particular view. As these attitudes are discursive they would be formed in a way that “only makes sense within a set of classifications that is established by a particular discourse” (Abercrombie et al., p. 111).

**Parenting Styles**

Berger (2008) in her work on The Developing Person discusses the three styles of parenting as developed by Baumrind which are authoritarian, permissive and authoritative. Although these were initially defined 40 years ago they are still used to define and label a parenting style. The different styles of parenting were expected to correlate with some of the participant’s responses regarding the children’s access to restricted video games. Children with parents that are permissive were expected to be allowed full access to any video game despite the guidelines on the packaging. Those from an authoritative background were expected to be
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allowed access to video games that are slightly more mature but not many years above the rating. Whereas children from an authoritarian background were expected to be allowed only those games that corresponded to the relevant age rating. This was based on the assumption that the parents had knowledge of the ratings system and understood how the guidelines worked.

The “Parenting Style Questionnaire”

The analysis attempted to find correlations between the types of parenting style and the access to restricted video games. However with any restricted media the appropriateness may be ignored by the parent or seen as something to be circumvented by the potential underage consumer. To determine the parenting styles of the participants a self report questionnaire was used developed by Robinson, Mandelco, Olsen & Hart in 1995. Due to its widespread use there is a high level of validity. The above form the basis for decision making process of access to or restriction of video games with rated content. The qualitative discourse analysis attempted to understand the construction of the interviewee’s thoughts on the above and how this influenced their final decision.

Discussion

As shown above the attitudes to video games in general have come a long way since the negative hyperbole in the media regarding the effects of video games. The issue that is pertinent to the research question is one of accessibility to the restricted video games for the children. This is dependent on the permission of the parent, either directly through the parent acquiring the video game or indirectly by them being allowed to be played in the house. The formation of
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these attitudes that either allow or deny access to the restricted games by the parent is critical to this project and in answering the research question.
Method

Materials
Notebook
Pen
Dictaphone
NVIVO 8
Parenting style questionnaire
Informed consent form
IFCO ratings
PEGI ratings
PEGI descriptors

Apparatus

Initially the informed consent form was required to be signed before proceeding. Once this was obtained the self reporting parenting style questionnaire was completed. The interview questions and responses were then recorded on a Dictaphone with any relevant notes taken. After transcription the data was used with NVIVO to generate themes for analysis.

Participants

The participants were selected by convenience sampling near video game stores in the Dublin area. They were approached and asked if they would have time to assist in the research. All of the participants were parents with children that played video games. There were no
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preferences on gender, education or age. The pivotal factor was having children under 18 as otherwise the issue of video games being restricted would be irrelevant.

Design

Qualitative or Quantitative – Natural Selection?

The question of choosing either of the methods of research and their appropriateness is partially guided by the question. According to (Lewis, 2003) “these decisions flow from the research questions, but ... [are] also influenced by the context, structure and timing of research” (p. 56). Whilst it may appear an easy assumption for the relevant type of research and analysis method, a critical review of the decisions to be made is still required. Consideration needs to be given to the selection and rejection process for the specific choices of data collection and analysis.

As (Lewis, 2003) states the “value of qualitative research is in understanding rather than measuring difference” (p. 50) which is what is required from the data which further highlights the inappropriateness of quantitative methods. As attitudes are discursive and only of value within a context this naturally leads to the rejection of statistical methods as they would lack the ability to elicit any depth of understanding.

This decision could be altered by increasing the sample size and the use of a questionnaire but that would be more appropriate once the attitudes were understood and quantified. This would allow the generation of a questionnaire to collect the relevant data on a larger scale.
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Range of research

While there isn’t any specific research relevant to the research question, there is a growing body of related work, as discussed earlier. As there is little material concerning the underlying attitudes of the parents this could be deemed as an initial exploratory study. There is however a large focus on various types of media such as films and video games and possible links to aggression and desensitising effects. Due to the large publicity and hyperbole in the media associating violent video games with headline incidents, there are negative connotations on what is in theory a restricted product to those below the respective age rating. Although there is some shift in focus as to how the restricted games were obtained and parental responsibilities sensationalist headlines still feature prominently in an emotive area for the public.

Timing

The timing of the interview is important but not critical as the data is gathered as the participant is near a video game store. As Lewis (2003) states “there is a danger of deterioration in the quality of the data collected through problems with recall, distortion and post-event rationalisation” (p. 54). Although the attitudes are not particularly fluid, the point of collecting the data as the participant is purchasing a rated game would aid in getting them to discuss their decisions for making the purchase. This is especially relevant for those that are either allowing or denying the child access to restricted games. This means the generated data may attempt to avoid any issues with the participants structuring their response to the interviewer, and in particular they may attempt to justify the use of restricted games by their children in a way that skews any data.
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As the interviews are completed Lewis (2003) advises that “fieldwork needs to be organised ... to integrate later stages of data, to make comparisons and identify changes” (p. 56). As this is only a small study the interviews will be subject to minor changes as any areas of note are uncovered. This may occur during the interview process as they evolve from an open style to a more directed approach if specific data is to be collected.

Analysis

By its very nature qualitative studies requires an involved researcher to elicit a meaning from the generated data of the interview. To extract the meaning from the data NVIVO was used to generate themes and gain an understanding from the interviews. The themes were then analysed with discourse analysis.

This particular method of analysis which was employed as it specifically attempts to understand the “meaning within its context, ... looking for the overall structure in the data” (Spencer, Ritchie, & O'Connor, 2003, p. 207). Interpretation of the data to uncover the parental attitudes requires the understanding of “what the content and structure of the discourse conveys” (Ritchie, 2003, p. 35).

The understanding of the formation of these attitudes could be used to assist in the education of parents and the impacts of their decision making; or to highlight any areas that lack knowledge. As the topic of restricted video games is still quite emotive and a concern for many parents, there are many areas that need research to remove the fear and hyperbole surrounding them.
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Procedure

Data Collection

Opting to use qualitative methods led to the question of how the data was to be collected. Due to the limited resources available it was decided data was to be collected by approximately six in-depth interviews aiming to reach saturation point. There was an element of improvisation to the research as the interviews as although having structure, they are still open.

After agreeing to take part in the research project the participants were briefed about the general aims of the project and signed the informed consent form (Appendix 1) taking a copy for themselves. Before the start of the recorded interview the participant completed the self reporting parenting style questionnaires (Appendix 2). This comprised of two sets of 13 questions for the authoritarian and authoritative parenting styles each and four questions for the permissive style. The questions are based on a six point scale similar to the Likert scale, ranging from ‘always’ to ‘never’ in response to the questions. There is a high level of validity due to the widespread use of this questionnaire. Each of the three sets of parenting style questions generated a score indicating their preferred or dominant parenting style.

After this was completed the participants undertook an in-depth interview based on an initial 24 questions (Appendix 3), with the understanding that they were not limited to responding solely to these if they had further comments. The questions were loosely based on DVD and film as well as video games to maintain responses based on the participants actions rather than assumptions.

During the course of the interview they were shown the IFCO ratings (Appendix 4), the PEGI ratings (Appendix 5) and PEGI descriptors (Appendix 6) as a prompt. They were fully
aware that they could stop the interview at any time if they wanted to withdraw but there were none during the interviews that chose to do so.

**Ethical Considerations**

To ensure ethical standards were maintained the participants read and signed the informed consent form with a copy to keep. Before the interviews were conducted they were assured any responses would be confidential and they could withdraw at any time and that any information and data gathered from the participants would be used anonymously. None of the participants were concerned by any of the issues they were briefed on and were willing to proceed.
Results

To ensure the participant’s anonymity as detailed in the ethical considerations they have been assigned a number from P1 to P6 to distinguish between the responses, any comments from the interviewer are denoted I. To highlight the ages and gender of children in the responses they will be indicated by gender and age, for example M13 or F9. Also the children’s names were occasionally used so they will be replaced in any references to their names with the same coding.

The data gained from the interviews did reach a level of saturation as similar responses were given. This may be due in part to the similarities of the responses to the parenting style questionnaire as discussed below.

Parenting Styles

The self-reporting style questionnaire results are detailed in table 1. Four of the six parenting styles from the questionnaire were predominantly authoritative. There was a participant that although the highest value was authoritative this was not as strong compared to the others. The remaining style was authoritarian. With such a large proportion of participants falling within the same cohort, a wider survey would possibly yield a more balanced perspective from the population concerning their attitudes. This would be assuming that the parenting styles reported are not indicative of the general population.
As discussed earlier the expectations were that the responses to the interviews would correlate with particular parenting styles. These were that the authoritative parenting style would be communicative to the child about any decisions with clear set boundaries that are enforced. The authoritarian style would have clear rules that are strictly enforced with little communication why the rules are set. The permissive style would have little discipline with the child being there to communicate with the child but having few demands on maturity.

**Restricted does not necessarily mean restricted**

As suggested by Griffiths (2010) the parents response to ratings is based on their own personal experiences rather than being restricted to the adults market. The parents would often be “complicit in buying age-restricted video games for their children”. Both the IFCO and PEGI ratings systems were recognised, if not by name then by the age symbols. The perception of ratings as a whole was as a guideline rather than a specific limit.

“**[P4]** Well I would look and see what they are, and that would be it like. But I like, obviously I know like, it’s gonna tell you if there’s strong language or if there’s definitely violence, and that you know, I’d be judge it like that and what I think, they should be allowed to watch it. So I’d know of it.”

One participant viewed them negatively.
“[P2] Don’t go by the ratings because as far as I’m concerned all kids are watching what films they like at the end of the day. They know more than we do half the time.”

When P2 was questioned specifically about the IFCO ratings regarding film and DVD they saw them negatively again. Stating that the age ratings should be lowered based on personal experience.

“[P2] The Irish ratings, it’s a joke, is what I think. They banned certain films. I usually just go by the, when I take him to the pictures I just go by the, the adverts and if the adverts are too bad I won’t bring him to them. When you talk about 15s and then you’re talking about, he’s going to the cinema for 16s and he’s only 13. And yet I think the film should be rated 12s because there’s not that much action in it. And 18s I must admit, some of the films are pretty bad alright but, I’ve never brought him to one of them yet, and I don’t intend to. I still think the 16s he should be allowed to because I don’t think it’s that bad.”

These responses were contrary to the highest parenting style of P2 which was authoritarian. This may be that although the authoritarian style would be strict, the rules they would expect the child to adhere to whilst strongly enforced, would be individual to the parent.

Other participants although not as negative still perceived the ratings as not always accurate.

“[P3] I do sometimes it depends, if I’ve seen the film, if it’s an eighteens and I’ve seen it myself and I know it’s okay and well it’s not that bad, I’d let (M12) watch it.”

This was applied to many films that were rated much higher than their children’s ages.

“[P4] So like, that’s what I was saying about the DVD like. If I thought my four year old could watch this obviously I’m gonna let him. But then like, I wouldn’t leave the room, and let them watch it on their own because I’d want to see what they were looking at. 12’s again it depends on what film, I would let the 4 year old watch it.”
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When questioned about the PEGI video games ratings the same attitude arose, that the parent’s experiences would be used rather than the specific rating.

“[P1] I don’t know if they are any real help, I suppose for some, I have grown up with games all my life and your hear Grand Theft Auto and the first thing you are going to go into is drugs, gambling, possibly sex, definitely violence.”

Some parents would make sure they had experienced the game first hand.

“[P2] I just go by, I usually play a bit of the game myself first and if I think it’s too bad then I won’t let him play it, plain and simple, that’s it. I always make sure I play them first before I let him even near them, that’s my motto.”

Whereas others would use the advice of family members.

“[P3] There is one or two games I don’t allow him on (referring to M12) on because M22 tells me not to. M22 is the eldest, he’d say mam don’t let him, so I wouldn’t.”

“[P4] I do kind of ignore that a bit. Not that I ignore it but I would check out the game like my 11 year old has say, games that are 18. I don’t, I’ve never thought really bought a shooting game or whatever, Black Ops. Say for example that one, I didn’t want him to get it and I wouldn’t buy it for Christmas, but then it turned out all his friends had it. So I had a look at it and my brother had a look at it, and I was like, okay. And he would play that all the time. 18s is the only one that I would be concerned about if it’s like, if it was 12s or 16s, even though he’s not those ages, I wouldn’t be too concerned about the game. It’s the 18 one that I didn’t let him buy until I checked it myself.”

P4 had values around the middle for the parenting style questionnaire with a slightly higher value for authoritative. They had one of the highest values for permissiveness which may be the reason why a game that was initially denied was eventually bought.
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Although the participant is using their own experiences as a guideline rather than the ratings system they are still aware of the content associated with restricted titles. This was a major theme within the research as parents were basing their buying decision for the children on either personal experience with the video game or advice from family. Parents were forming their attitudes, and subsequently their decisions on the content rather than the rating designated to the restricted video games. The decision to base restriction by the parent on content rather than age rating is not consistent though. Certain areas of content would still be off limits to their children.

“[P2] I go by content I never go by bloody .. by any of them. I go by the fear one alright, if it’s frightening. Because he is a bit of a scaredy cat, so I want to make sure he doesn’t play any of those games but the rest, oh and the sex one yeh, I’ll agree on that one. I make sure he doesn’t play any of them.”

“[P1] Some of them are, er yes. They are useful yes but again its only a basic guideline to be brutally honest with you. And again it depends on the content of the game, it depends on the game or again DVD, I would think it would be content based to be honest with you. So, again with games either I would have heard about it or knew something about it before it was bought or I probably bought it for myself and then based on what I thought of it, he could play it.”

The above participants had contrasting parental styles, P1 had an authoritative style and P2 had an authoritarian style. Despite this both parents had similar attitudes of allowing the child access to restricted games based on their own personal attitudes.

Age Ratings

From the responses in the interviews it was clear that the ratings were being used as a guideline and the parents were forming their attitudes from personal experiences with the game. This was consistent for all of the parenting styles yet there were still instances where the rating
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would be seen as a caution rather than either ignored completely or refusing to allow the child access. The presence of an 18 symbol on the video game would make the parent pause to consider.

“[P4] I do yeh. No I do think they are useful because it made me stop and just not let him buy say Black Ops. You know they did make me stop and think, I shouldn’t have bought it.”

P4 is again demonstrating their higher level of permissiveness by going against what they thought would have been the appropriate response and allowing access. Their permissiveness is clearly displayed in this response.

“[P3] Well that’s a hard one because, he’s gonna do it anyway isn’t he? Do you know what I mean like? I can put boundaries down but he’s, gonna do, push it as you said. I can set them down but...”

Although P5 is conscious of the rating on the video game or DVD would use the age ratings as a baseline before making a decision on the content.

“[P5] I generally go by the age, and I ask usually, go for advice off the staff. I mean my reaction is that it’s not 18s for nothing, there has to be a reason why it’s 18s you know and then, 16s or whatever.”

However as the parent would override the age rating as discussed earlier, this may cause confusion for the child as to what is and isn’t allowed. There was some ambiguity from one of the participants as to what the rating defined.

“[P6] Well I find some of the games between 12 and 16 shouldn’t be that age group, they’re targeted wrong, and vice versa. I don’t choose the games by rating no. If they said to me they wanted Destroy All Humans 2 and if it said 15s, I wouldn’t say no you can’t have it because it’s 15s I’d look at the back and see what’s in it. And then if I’m not sure what’s in it, I’d ask. And then I know if they’re chopping of someone’s head or they’re doing something really gruesome in it then I’d say no. But then it would depend on the context.”
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As the participants were going against the age ratings they justified it to themselves as something that was commonplace.

“[P2] Black Ops was the only really game he wanted, so I got him that one in the end. Because I thought it was okay for him to be honest, sure all kids are playing it, sure Jesus. Even six year olds are playing the bloody game.”

The mixed message that games rated higher are acceptable indicates that the attitudes towards restricted games are based on internal values to the parent. As these values are not apparent to the child the suitability of a restricted game despite the age rating would be unknown. This could be interpreted by the child that all violent 18 games are suitable when in fact the parent would be using their own system of values and beliefs to judge the suitability.

“[P5] Yeh, ratings and content both, definitely I mean .. because as I say some 18s games I would think will be okay and it would be the content that would .. determine what I’d let them buy. It’d be a mixture of the two rather than just one or the other but more so the content.”

“[P1] Yeh, it would depend on the game and content. Content more than rating now I have to be honest, it would be more content than rating. Because if you have a game that involves running around and just basically paying off hookers left right and centre and that’s basically the sole purpose of the game, then no he wouldn’t be playing it.”

The age ratings were largely seen as something that was of minor value to the parents. The ratings were either ignored mistrusted as to whether it was correct.

Parental Knowledge

As there were quite large differences between participants with their knowledge of the video games, this represented itself in the interviews with varying responses.
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“[P1] Because I have an interest in the games as well and enjoy playing it, it’s probably more of a plus thing on my side you know what I mean. Whereas most parents might not.”

This contrasted with P3 who gained information from one of their other children.

“[P3] I’m not up on the games, I’m not the hip mam with the, I don’t even know how to turn on the console. I’m very pleased, I do go on M22. I say M22 what is that, so, yeh.”

Or from the store they visited to but their video games.

“[P3] There’s one or two I’ve looked at and I’ve said no, and I’d actually speak to the guy in the shop and say what did you think? And once or twice I’d say no, there’s too much violence in it or...”

The information that P1 would be getting would be primary, whereas P3 would be acquiring secondary information from family or a member of staff at the store. The secondary information would be based on the other person’s attitudes to video games so may confuse the child more so due to erratic or inconsistent boundaries being used.

Children’s Justification

The children were quite consistent in their reasoning as to why they should be allowed a specific game. Every participant had a similar answer to the question of their child’s reasons for being allowed access.

“[P5] Because all of my friends have it would be, and how come he’s allowed to play it and I’m not allowed to play it.”

This reasoning was repeated several times.

“[P3] Because all of his friends have it. Their mams let them have it and I’d be well I’m not their mother, you know so, that’s the main one, all of their friends have it.”
PARENTAL VIDEO GAME ATTITUDES

“[P6] Because people in our school have it, but there was one part of the context that I didn’t like but I explained and he didn’t realise it was in it, he was fine.

P6 is indicating their strong authoritative style by discussing the reasoning behind the decision. As discussed earlier the mixed messages from being allowed some and denied other video games was used as a reason for being permitted subsequent games.

“[P4] All my friends have it is the most common one. Or my other game does this and you never said anything about that, that would be another one.”

P5 was also authoritative, setting limits and also expecting a level of maturity from their children.

“[P5] They know by the third no that I’m not willing to discuss it with you so that’s it, it’s over.. and they’re not getting it. And again you know again there is games that you know mightn’t be the age bracket but I would check out and if I feel they’re okay I let them. A lot of it is based on trust.”

The point was raised that the children would discuss the use of restricted video games and attempt to obtain them through their parents as a symbol of status.

“[P1] My friend has it, so it would be a sort of peer led, peer based thing. But again they could all be saying that to their parents because they have heard or read or somebody in school might have had it and played it and said ‘it was deadly’. So then everybody else wants to go ‘well it’s deadly’ and everybody else has to play it and the people who have played it, and I’m allowed to play it and if I say you play it and you can say I play it. So that’s more or less the best excuse I’ve heard so far to be honest with you.”

This reinforces the point of the mixed messages from the parents as the children try and leverage access by varying methods.

Obtaining Restricted Games
When asked how the children obtained their video games the parents were usually there to buy it for them.

“[P1] 9 times out of 10 with the games I would be with him. He would be buying them but I would be with him to give my consent, so that he can buy them because some, most shops do rate, GameStop anyway does, I know that for a fact. But they won’t sell er underage, or an overage game to an underage child, which is brilliant. And erm, I mean there should be more of that because in some of the other places that aren’t doing that, they just see it as a sale full stop.’’

Despite the use of the ratings, parents were predominantly there to supply the games to their children even when the store may refuse the sale.

“[P2] I have an agreement with his mother that I will buy his games for him and that’s it. I said when he wants a game, I will have a look at it and if it’s okay I’ll buy it for him otherwise he’s not allowed it.”

“[P3] If he sees a game and he likes it I’ll ask M22 about it so, he wouldn’t go out and buy it himself. But now I know if he goes to the shop they won’t sell it him anyway, do you know what I mean? So he’s not going to get it anyway.”

Despite being aware of the ratings and some stores refusing to sell the game to anyone underage, the parent is available to allow their child access. This may be in part due to the perception that video games seen as something for children.

“[P1] I’ve often been in GameStop where, like young kids, 5 year olds, 6 year olds bring mammy in, pick up a game, walk up to the counter with mammy, because obviously mammy has the money. But then it’s only when they get there that the staff point out that, well it is an 18s game. And it’s only then that the parent’s eyes seem to be open. I think because it’s gaming it’s sort of seen as more for kids, if you know what I mean.”

This could be partly why parents view the ratings as possibly too high for the games as they think that the content is inherently for children. Yet the assumption may then be that all of the video games are for children, even those that the parents were concerned about.
“[P2] Even when I played it I wouldn’t play any more if it... Manhunt, that’s the one game I was, that’s part of it, it should never have been brought out, for kids.”

By stating that the restricted games should not have been brought out for children despite an 18+ rating clearly indicates a fundamental misconception in the formation of their attitudes towards restricted video games. This could either be through misunderstanding or a conscious trivialisation of the ratings system.

Effects

The effects that video games may have on children was generally perceived as negligible in the short term.

“[P1] I can probably say, because of the way it was introduced, that it is only a game, I can only say in theory none, no effect. But again I don’t know, he could find himself on the roof of this building shooting at people screaming GTA lives forever. But as far as I can see he just uses it as a form of entertainment and that’s all it is, a form of entertainment. It’s not to be taken seriously, you don’t go round stealing cars, you don’t go round shooting people, you don’t go round doing drugs. So it’s just purely as a form of entertainment so I would hope, I don’t know long term we’ll see what happens. But I would hope the answer to that would be none.”

There were however some concerns that some of the content may be easier to mimic than others. This was true of gun based games being viewed as acceptable and games involving violence that would be easily copied as more of a concern.

“[P2] The shooting ones, I think they’re all used to that, I’d be more afraid that kids get in to the games that are erm, when they’re... Especially these games now where they’re bashing up and you can use any weapon you want. But the gun games I’m not worried about it’s more the, they’re bringing out these games where they use baseball bats or anything that’s around you. That’s what I’d be more afraid of.”
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P3 clearly shows some of their concerns that some children can act out what they have seen in the video game.

“[P3] Well I don’t think it’s... Well from, I don’t know. I look at M12 now and he’s, he doesn’t seem to be acting out in any other way so I don’t know. Long term maybe I don’t know at the moment he seems okay, he’s still okay at school, it’s not affecting his studying or .. so I don’t know. I’d know long term I think it can affect some kids. They can act out what’s there, what they’ve been doing. They act it out in real life.”

This may be due to the permissive style of P3 that despite their perception that there is a chance that some children act out what they have seen, the child is still allowed access to restricted content. The view of the child re-enacting some of the content is also stated by P6.

“[P6] Sometimes they can try and re-enact something they’ve seen. The wrestling game [16+], sometimes they try and do the wrestling moves from the game. He would re-enact some of the shooting games with his soldiers, he’d set up army and he has a front line and a back line and he would re-enact, stuff like that.”

Whilst a similar concern that the child may mimic what they have seen, the authoritative style of P6 would be more prone to discussing any issues they may have. There was only one display of any negative behaviour from playing video games.

“[P4] The biggest thing for me now is because I never know what the youngest fella, the little fella is kinda comes by his, his kind of aggressiveness. Now that could be just part of who he is as a person like, as a character he might because he’s only 4 and he’s only just starting to develop what his character is like. There’s probably a little bit of him in that as well like you know, so it’s something I have to try and find.”

This behaviour was also true of other types of media for P4.

“[P4] The cartoons, the games he plays kind of match the cartoons he watches, so it would be a combination.”
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As the parents were consistently making restricted content available to their underage children this may be indicative of the rationale behind restricting the content contrary to what the parents may think is suitable. There was a strong message that it would be dependent on the individual child.

“[P5] I just think it’s a very personal thing with kids, you know that I mean you know, children’s video games have been blamed for years for things, I definitely think it’s the way the kids have been brought up, and how they .. you know see things, how they see life. Rather than saying you know they went off and killed a little boy and they have to blame it on Child’s Play [Restricted film] if you know what I mean.”

This statement emphasises that the parents are pivotal in the shaping and development of their children. With such a position of influence the role of parent to nurture and protect is particularly salient regarding the access to restricted video games.
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Discussion

The purpose of this research project was to uncover the parental attitudes to restricted video games and whether there was a correlation with parenting style. The parenting styles and the level of access the children were afforded to restricted content was also expected to have a connection. The assumption was that the child would be allowed greater access for the more permissive parenting style which was found to be partially true. Yet overall there was little difference between the different styles and the restrictions placed on the child according to the age rating. This may have been due to the concentration of authoritative parenting cohort in the study. In accordance with the authoritative parenting style, the reasons behind the denial of access to a specific game were communicated to the child. The permissive and authoritarian styles were not clearly represented within this study so further investigation may be needed to clarify for them specifically.

Ferguson (2010) commented that media based moral panics were central to the perceptions of aggressiveness and video games. Yet despite this the parents were willing to assist in permitting their child access to restricted video games. Although the participants commented that there was little effect from the use of restricted content in the short term. Even when fears were voiced by the participants towards only knowing the short term effects, they were willing to allow the child the use of video games above their age rating.

Research on the effects of video game violence is generally conducted on people under the appropriate age restriction according to Griffiths (2010), who questions the particular usefulness of these studies. This research could be interpreted as having either little value or validating the media based moral panics. However as was found with this research project there
is a consistent disregard of the age rating. As with cigarette and alcohol studies which are also restricted, there is a necessity to understanding their effects on those that in theory should not be able to access them.

As was expected the participants were all complicit in buying their children restricted content that was rated higher than the user’s age. Although as stated earlier there was the assumption that there would be more of a distinction between the parenting styles. This was in accordance with Griffiths (2010) who further comments that age ratings may not be a suitable barrier to children gaining access. If the ratings were to become legally enforceable would the parent’s attitudes and behaviour be affected? As the parents were basing their purchasing decisions on their own internal values and beliefs rather than a standardised system, this could lead to confusion of the boundaries for the children. As stated by one participant, their child reasoned that they should be allowed access to the same age restricted game as it had similar content. This confusion of boundary setting could be further compounded when using the information gained from either a family or staff member. As the children also used the reasoning that all their friends play it, this indicates a degree of flexibility in the parent’s boundary setting and enforcement. There were slight differences between the degrees of access afforded and the parenting styles but wider studies would be needed to find consistent correlations.

It was found that the age ratings as well as ignored were also viewed with doubt as to whether they were correct. This could be due to a shift in recent times to a more liberal society. Some participants viewed video games as just a form of entertainment for children which may be why they perceive the ratings system as something not to be taken seriously. The trivialisation of
the ratings system is highlighted by a participant that a particularly violent 18+ restricted game should never have been released for children. With the view that age ratings are either incorrect or ignored Buckingham’s (2001) recommendation that the government should seek to educate rather than censor would seem appropriate. This may be especially important if the ratings were to become legally enforceable.

With access to restricted content being the norm for the participant’s children, the comment by Kline as cited by Quart (2001) that children are consumers of violence is partially true. The willingness of the parents to provide the restricted games displays a general perception that age ratings are not of importance which greatly undermines their utility to the parents.

The effects on the underage consumer are divided in to two arguments as stated earlier by Borsches (2009). These arguments were that the user experienced more aggression and less empathy or alternatively was used as a pressure release valve, similar to rough and tumble play. The increase in aggression was observed by one participant that allowed their child access to the restricted content. This reaction was similarly observed when they were watching cartoons. As the video games were rated higher than the child’s age and were based on the cartoons, this logically leads to the assumption that the cartoons were similarly rated. Markey and Markey cited by Fowls (2010) in their work on aggression and violent video games concluded that there were clear increases of aggression in individuals predisposed to aggression. There was a clear increase demonstrated in the instance noted but further investigation would be needed to uncover the specific reasons. The participants believed that shooting games were acceptable, but violent games that were easier to mimic were a concern. The two types of violent game that were mentioned were wrestling and Manhunt style games involving using baseball bats and domestic
objects to hand. These concerns were raised but access was given for the wrestling and a similar Grand Theft Auto. This raises an interesting point as there appears to be little consistency in the access given to children, emphasising the issue of confusing boundaries discussed earlier.

The work of Jenkins as cited by Quart (2001) emphasised that the games may not be just about violence. The girls taking pleasure in beating the boys at their own game was highlighted as a particular point. One participant noted that their son saw the games as just games when discussing the effects they might have as this was consistently communicated to him.

**Conclusion**

With such a vast market becoming more mainstream, there are many opportunities for research into video games. This research project has highlighted the issues concerned with restricted content and the conflicting attitudes of the parents allowing access. This raises a concern that the age ratings are either not in line with what the majority of parents consider suitable or there is a wider issue of educating the public.

**Limitations**

Similar parenting styles represented within the study may have skewed the results as the access granted to the restricted titles was reasonably close across all styles of parenting. This could be better tested with a broader study. The parent present at the video game store although willing to participate in the study may not necessarily be the primary parent involved in the children’s use and access to video games. There may be differences in the levels of participation in the boundary setting and enforcement of what is appropriate.
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Recommendations

The study found that access to restricted video games was not restricted to specific parenting styles. A broader study would gain a better and possibly more balanced understanding of any correlations between the restricted content and parenting styles. As with any study based on previous work, this could be built upon the work above to advance any understanding. As there is a substantial video games market there is lots of scope for further research.
References


Appendix 1

Informed Consent Form

People’s Perceptions to DVDs and Video Games

I am a Social Science Degree student at DBS about to complete my final year. This interview looks at people’s use of DVDs and video games in their household. The interview is structured to provide information for my final year BA Social Science thesis examining the views of people to different types of media. All research conducted by final year students is done for the purpose of meeting course requirements. Please help me by participating in the interview which will be approximately one hour in length. Please say what you really think and try to be as honest and accurate as possible. There are no “right” or “wrong” answers to these questions. I am very interested in your views. All responses will be recorded for study purposes and will be treated with the strictest sensitivity and are anonymous. You may withdraw from participation at any time.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding the interview, please feel free to contact me on by email at sirwellybob@hotmail.com or my supervisor, Dr Anna Wolniak at anna.wolniak@dbs.ie. If you are happy to proceed with the interview, please sign in the space provided below.

____________________________

Thank you for your cooperation.
PARENTAL VIDEO GAME ATTITUDES

Appendix 2

Parenting Style Questionnaire

PARENTING STYLE QUESTIONNAIRE

Please rate how often you engage in the different parenting practices, listed below. Scores range from ‘Never’ to ‘Always’ on a 5-point scale. At the end of each section, add up the scores and divide it by the number of questions in that section. The calculated score is your total score for that category. The highest score indicates your preferred parenting style.

Authoritative Parenting Style

1. I am responsive to my child’s feelings and needs:

   Never 1 2 3 4 5 6 Always

2. I take my child’s wishes into consideration before I ask him/her to do something:

   Never 1 2 3 4 5 6 Always

3. I explain to my child how I feel about his/her good/bad behaviour:

   Never 1 2 3 4 5 6 Always

4. I encourage my child to talk about his/her feelings and problems:

   Never 1 2 3 4 5 6 Always

5. I encourage my child to freely “speak his/her mind”, even if he/she disagrees with me:

   Never 1 2 3 4 5 6 Always

6. I explain the reasons behind my expectations:

   Never 1 2 3 4 5 6 Always

7. I provide comfort and understanding when my child is upset:

   Never 1 2 3 4 5 6 Always

8. I compliment my child:
Never  1  2  3  4  5  6  Always

9. I consider my child’s preferences when I make plans for the family (e.g., weekends away and holidays):
Never  1  2  3  4  5  6  Always

10. I respect my child’s opinion and encourage him/her to express them:
Never  1  2  3  4  5  6  Always

11. I treat my child as an equal member of the family:
Never  1  2  3  4  5  6  Always

12. I provide my child reasons for the expectations I have for him/her:
Never  1  2  3  4  5  6  Always

13. I have warm and intimate times together with my child:
Never  1  2  3  4  5  6  Always

Scoring: Total score ........ / 13 = .......

Authoritarian Parenting Style

1. When my child asks me why he/she has to do something I tell him/her it is because I said so, I am your parent, or because that is what I want:
Never  1  2  3  4  5  6  Always

2. I punish my child by taking privileges away from him/her (e.g., TV, games, visiting friends):
Never  1  2  3  4  5  6  Always

3. I yell when I disapprove of my child’s behaviour:

   Never 1 2 3 4 5 6 Always

4. I explode in anger towards my child:

   Never 1 2 3 4 5 6 Always

5. I spank my child when I don’t like what he/she does or says:

   Never 1 2 3 4 5 6 Always

6. I use criticism to make my child improve his/her behaviour:

   Never 1 2 3 4 5 6 Always

7. I use threats as a form of punishment with little or no justification:

   Never 1 2 3 4 5 6 Always

8. I punish my child by withholding emotional expressions (e.g., kisses and cuddles):

   Never 1 2 3 4 5 6 Always

9. I openly criticise my child when his/her behaviour does not meet my expectations:

   Never 1 2 3 4 5 6 Always

10. I find myself struggling to try to change how my child thinks or feels about things:

    Never 1 2 3 4 5 6 Always

11. I feel the need to point out my child’s past behavioural problems to make sure he/she will not do them again:

    Never 1 2 3 4 5 6 Always

12. I remind my child that I am his/her parent:

    Never 1 2 3 4 5 6 Always

13. I remind my child of all the things I am doing and I have done for him/her:

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**Scoring:** Total score \( \frac{\text{Total score}}{13} = \ldots \)

**Permissive Parenting Style**

1. I find it difficult to discipline my child:

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2. I give into my child when he/she causes a commotion about something:

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3. I spoil my child:

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4. I ignore my child's bad behaviour:

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**Scoring:** Total score \( \frac{\text{Total score}}{4} = \ldots \)

Parenting Styles: On the lines below you can record the rank order of your preferred parenting styles:

1) .......................................................... Score:

2) .......................................................... Score:

3) .......................................................... Score:

Appendix 3

Interview Questions

1. How many people are in your household?
   - List with ages

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2. How many TVs are there in your household? Where are the TVs located?
   - List family and whether they have access to a TV in their own room.

3. Does everyone use the TV together or are they used separately?

4. How many DVD players do you have in the household? Where are the consoles located?
   - List family and whether they have access to a console in their own room

5. Does everyone use the DVD player together or are they used separately?

6. How many consoles do you have in the household? Where are the consoles located?
   - List family and whether they have access to a console in their own room

7. Does everyone use the console together or are they used separately?

8. How many hours per day would each person in the household use each type of media?

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9. When a TV is being used are there any “ground rules”?

10. Would these be different for TV, DVD and video games?

11. Are these different for each child?

12. What do you know of the ratings systems for TV, DVD and video games?
   - Show IFCO ratings sheet
   - Discuss what they think they represent
   - Show PEGI ratings sheet
   - Discuss what they think they represent

13. Have you used the ratings before?

14. Do you/would you find the ratings useful?

15. Who buys the DVDs and video games for the household?

16. How would the children be encouraged to buy DVDs and video games for themselves?
   - Detail for each child

17. Would you restrict the child’s use of TV, DVD or video games based on ratings or content?
   - Detail for each child

18. As children grow and they want to experience different DVDs and video games, what are your expectations?

19. As with most parents’ experiences, there are certain titles that children want that may not be suitable as they try and push the boundaries, would you allow them to buy or would you buy them for the child?
   - Detail for each child
   - Current experiences?

20. What effects do you think the different types of media have on the child?
   - Detail for each child
   - Current experiences?

21. If you have not let a child have a specific DVD or video game before, how did the child respond?

22. What reasons do you hear from your child as to why they should have a specific title?
   - All of my friends have it
   - I have other games like it
   - I played it at a friends
PARENTAL VIDEO GAME ATTITUDES

- Others (specify)..............

23. Would a particular parent be more lenient than the other?

24. Any other questions
Appendix 4

IFCO Ratings

The IFCO’s approach to classifying cinema films and video/DVDs is guided by three main principles:

- They believe that adults (over 18) should be free, within the law, to choose what they wish to view
- They have a duty to protect children and young persons from harm
- They strongly encourage and promote the exercise of parental responsibility

**WHAT DO THE LABELS MEAN?**

**GENERAL**
Fit for viewing by persons GENERALLY.

**PG (PARENTAL GUIDANCE)**
Fit for viewing generally, but in the case of a child under 12 years, under PARENTAL GUIDANCE

**12**
Fit for viewing by persons aged 12 YEARS OR MORE

**15**
Fit for viewing by persons aged 15 YEARS OR MORE

**OVER 18**
Fit for viewing by persons aged 18 YEARS OR MORE
PEGI Ratings

The Pan-European Game Information age rating system was established to help European parents make informed decisions on buying computer games. It has replaced some national age rating systems with a single system now used throughout most of Europe. Age ratings are systems used to ensure that entertainment content, such as DVDs and computer games, are clearly labelled for the age group for which they are most suitable.

WHAT DO THE LABELS MEAN?

PEGI age rating labels appear on front and back of the packaging at one of the below age levels. They provide a reliable indication of the suitability of the game content in terms of protection of minors. The age rating does not take into account the difficulty level or skills required to play a game.

3 The content of games given this rating is considered suitable for all age groups. Some violence in a comical context (typically Bugs Bunny or Tom & Jerry cartoon like forms of violence) is acceptable. The child should not be able to associate the character on the screen with real life characters, they should be totally fantasy. The game should not contain any sounds or pictures that are likely to scare or frighten young children. No bad language should be heard and there should be no scenes containing nudity nor any referring to sexual activity.

7 Any game that would normally be rated at 3+ but contains some possibly frightening scenes or sounds may be considered suitable in this category. Some scenes of nudity may be permitted but never in a sexual context.

12 Games that show violence of a slightly more graphic nature towards fantasy character and/or non graphic violence towards human-looking characters or recognisable animals, as well as games that show nudity of a slightly more graphic nature would fall in this age category. Any bad language in this category must be mild and fall short of sexual expletives.

16 This rating is applied once the depiction of violence (or sexual activity) reaches a stage that looks the same as would be expected in real life. More extreme bad language, the concept of the use of tobacco and drugs and the depiction of criminal activities can be content of games that are rated 16+.

18 The adult classification is applied when the level of violence reaches a stage where it becomes depictions of gross violence and/or includes elements of specific types of violence. Gross violence is the most difficult to define since in a lot of cases it can be very subjective, but in general terms it can be classed as the depictions of violence that would make the viewer feel a sense of revulsion.
Appendix 6

PEGI Descriptors

The PEGI age rating system also uses descriptors shown on the back of packaging. These indicate the main reasons why a game has received a particular age rating. There are eight such descriptors:

- **BAD LANGUAGE**
  Game contains bad language

- **DISCRIMINATION**
  Game contains depictions of, or material which may encourage, discrimination

- **DRUGS**
  Game refers to or depicts the use of drugs

- **FEAR**
  Game may be frightening or scary for young children

- **GAMBLING**
  Games that encourage or teach gambling

- **SEX**
  Game depicts nudity and/or sexual behaviour or sexual references

- **VIOLENCE**
  Game contains depictions of violence

- **ONLINE GAMEPLAY**
  Game can be played online