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Chenxin Ma

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MLIS 9201 Final Project: Developing a game classification policy for children's game

Chenxin Ma

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Nowadays, video games have become a prevalent form of entertainment in the daily lives of young people. In modern times, digital play encompasses a wide range of activities, including playing video games on consoles connected to televisions, computer games, games on mobile devices like phones and tablets, handheld video games, and augmented and virtual reality games that can be accessed on various platforms (Flynn et al., 2019). Digital games have both positive and negative effects on children's lives. One of the negative consequences is digital game addiction, which can have a detrimental impact on children's development, particularly during puberty when they are experiencing social and emotional stress (Aydogdu, 2018). Other negative consequences may include health related issues and social skills issues.

Besides, research showed kids aged two to four typically spend around twenty minutes per day playing digital games, with sixteen of those minutes spent on mobile devices (Flynn et al., 2019). Meanwhile, children aged five to eight spend about forty-two minutes playing digital games each day, with twenty-four of those minutes spent on mobile devices (Flynn et al., 2019). As the frequency of video game playing among children has risen, it has become necessary to broaden the scope of considerations. This is especially important given the growing concern among parents, pediatricians, teachers, politicians, and scholars about the depiction of violence in modern video games, which has become more lifelike than ever. Due to

the lack of policies that are specifically tailored to children's games, it is crucial to establish well-defined game policies and classification elements.

To inform parents about the content of video games, many countries have adopted the use of labels that indicate the presence of violence or sexual material (Bijvank et al., 2009). The world has several groups that focus on game policies, and one of them is the Pan European Game Information (PEGI). It is a rating system used in 38 European countries that provides information about the content and age appropriateness of video games to consumers (The PEGI Organization). PEGI was founded in 2003 with the goal of helping parents and guardians make informed decisions about the games they purchase for their children (The PEGI Organization). On the other hand, The Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) is the most recognized game rating system in North America.

The Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) is an independent and non-profit self-regulatory organization that provides age and content ratings for video games and mobile applications in North America. Its primary goal is to offer essential information about the content of games and apps, helping consumers make informed decisions about their purchases (Understand video game age ratings, 2021). Established in 1994, the ESRB's rating system includes five age-based categories, namely Early Childhood (EC), Everyone (E), Everyone 10+ (E10+), Teen (T), Mature (M), and Adults Only (AO) (ESRB, About). To help consumers better understand the content of games and apps, the ESRB provides content descriptors that indicate specific types of content that may be of concern, such as violence, language, and sexual

themes(Understand video game age ratings, 2021). Developers submit their games and apps to the ESRB for review, where a team of trained raters assesses the content and context of the game. The ESRB's rating process is transparent, and it involves established criteria that the raters use to assess the content (ESRB, About). The ESRB also offers resources for parents, such as a website that provides information on the rating system and how to use it, tools for managing children's game play and online interactions, and other relevant information (Understand video game age ratings, 2021). By doing so, the ESRB plays a vital role in helping consumers make informed decisions about the content of games and apps and promoting responsible use of interactive media.

Although ratings are primarily intended to guide parents in selecting suitable games for their children, players of all ages may also use them to choose games that match their interests. However, the use of age-based labels and content warnings may inadvertently increase the appeal of restricted video games (Bijvank et al., 2009). Currently, it is important to take into account other aspects of game policies such as educational and cultural values, health warnings, parental controls, and more.

In the following sections, I will outline essential classification elements that must be considered when developing a comprehensive game policy agreement for children, irrespective of the country. These elements can serve as a valuable resource for parents looking to choose games suitable for their children.

Game Policy agreement classification elements (ESRB, About)

1. Age appropriateness:

- a. Early Childhood (EC), Everyone (E), Everyone 10+ (E10+), Teen (T), Mature (M), and Adults Only (AO). Each category corresponds to a certain age range, and the content of games and apps is evaluated based on the intended audience.
- b. Games with an Early Childhood (EC) rating are suitable for children ages 3 and up. These games have minimal violence and are designed to be educational and non-threatening.
- c. Everyone (E) rated games are appropriate for ages 6 and up and may contain some mild violence, but nothing that is deemed harmful to children.
- d. Games with an Everyone 10+ (E10+) rating are suitable for children ages 10 and up. These games may contain mild violence, mild language, and minimal suggestive themes.
- e. Teen (T) rated games are suitable for ages 13 and up and may contain stronger violence, mild to moderate language, and suggestive themes.
- f. Mature (M) rated games are intended for players ages 17 and up and may contain intense violence, strong language, and sexual content.
- g. Adults Only (AO) rated games are only appropriate for players ages 18 and up and may contain explicit sexual content and graphic violence. The ESRB's rating system provides an easy-to-understand method for parents and other consumers to evaluate the content of games and apps and determine if they are appropriate for their intended audience.

2. Content descriptors:

- a. The ESRB uses a broad range of over 30 content descriptors to cover various topics, including violence, language, sexual content, drug use, and gambling. Examples of these content descriptors include "Blood and Gore," "Strong Language," "Sexual Themes," "Drug Reference," and "Simulated Gambling.
- b. When the ESRB reviews a game or app, it assigns one or more content descriptors to indicate the specific type of content present. For instance, a game may receive both the "Blood and Gore" and "Violence" descriptors if it features graphic depictions of violent content with blood.
- c. It is essential to understand that content descriptors do not determine age ratings but are instead used to provide additional information about the content of a game or app beyond its age rating. By using content descriptors, the ESRB aims to help consumers make more informed decisions about the games and apps they choose to play or allow their children to play.

3. Interactive features:

- a. In-game purchases allow players to use real money to buy virtual items or currency within the game, while online interactions enable players to connect and play with others over the internet.
- b. As an instance, video games that offer in-game purchases are obligated to display this information on the game's packaging and provide explicit directions on how to make purchases and control spending. The ESRB also mandates that

games containing in-game purchases must bear a label with an "In-Game Purchases" notification on their rating label.

4. Culture awareness:

- a. Video games can include themes, characters, and settings that may be offensive or insensitive to certain cultures or communities.
- b. The organization advises developers to consult with experts and community representatives to ensure that their games are culturally appropriate.

5. Education value:

- a. The ESRB recognizes the educational potential of games and assigns a "Learning" content descriptor to games that are designed to enhance learning and promote educational outcomes. Through this descriptor, the ESRB seeks to enable consumers to make informed decisions regarding the educational value of a game and encourages the use of interactive media for educational purposes.
- b. Having a separate classification for educational games helps to distinguish them from other games and makes it easier for educators to identify games that are suitable for use in the classroom. It also helps to highlight the value of games as a tool for learning and encourages the development of more educational games that can be used in schools, including kindergarten, elementary school, middle school and high school.

6. Advertisements control:

- a. Any advertising within games must be appropriately labeled and in line with the game's assigned age rating. This means that ads for products or games with

mature content are not allowed to be featured in games with an E or E10+ rating. The aim of this policy is to ensure that children are not exposed to inappropriate or harmful advertising while playing games.

7. Parents control:

- a. The parental control features can enable parents to monitor and restrict their child's gaming activities. These options include limiting access to games based on their age rating, blocking online interactions, and setting time limits on gameplay. These parental control settings are often integrated into gaming devices or can be accessed through external software tools.

8. Health related warning:

- a. These warnings may include automatic alerts reminding players to take breaks after a certain amount of gameplay time, such as 30 or 60 minutes, to prevent eye strain and other health issues.
- b. Additionally, games that contain flashing or flickering lights that could trigger seizures in individuals with photosensitive epilepsy must include a warning on the game's packaging and within the game itself. These measures aim to promote healthy gaming habits and protect players from potential health risks associated with extended gameplay or specific visual effects. Registration process

Reflection:

The widespread use of technology and video games among children has increased with the development of the internet. However, policies and regulations regarding these games have not kept up with this growth, which poses potential risks to children's safety and wellbeing. Some countries have government departments that aim to regulate and protect children from harmful content online, but even in these countries, there may be a lack of specific policies and regulations for video games, especially those designed for children.

This lack of regulation for children's games in certain countries is becoming a growing concern, especially with the rapid development of the internet and the availability of electronic devices. Children are exposed to various games from a young age, emphasizing the urgent need for rating systems and policies specifically designed for children's games. Collaboration among network and child protection departments of various countries is necessary to create and implement regulations that protect children from harmful content. However, it is alarming that despite the proliferation of games on the internet, there are still few specific policies and classifications for children's games.

As a responsible older sibling, I am worried about the impact of games on my 12-year-old brother's development and exposure to inappropriate content, especially since there is a lack of strict control over children's games in China. One time, I noticed my brother playing animal car racing games on a website and noticed that there were sexual elements in the character designs and layout. I quickly told him to close the game and found a more appropriate game

from the App Store to replace it. I also informed my mother about the incident, who agreed that this was a prevalent issue in children's games today. We both acknowledged the need to be more vigilant in selecting appropriate games for children. Without proper regulation, children may be exposed to inappropriate content without realizing the potential harm it can cause. It is therefore crucial that we prioritize the development of rating systems and policies that take into account the specific needs and vulnerabilities of children.

My project aims to make a meaningful contribution to the establishment of comprehensive policies and regulations that prioritize the safety and wellbeing of children when it comes to gaming. As children are increasingly exposed to games from a young age, it is essential to take steps towards safeguarding them from harmful content and encouraging healthy gaming habits. By focusing on the classification and regulation of children's games, my project seeks to provide a framework for parents and relevant departments to ensure that children have access to age-appropriate and safe games. Moreover, I believe that this project will raise much-needed awareness about the importance of this issue. Parents, educators, and government officials must understand the potential risks associated with unregulated gaming and take proactive steps to protect children. By advocating for the implementation of effective policies and rating systems, my project aims to encourage stakeholders to prioritize the safety and wellbeing of children in the gaming industry. Ultimately, I hope to make a positive impact on the lives of children and contribute to the creation of a safer and healthier gaming environment for all.

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