



# The Web and rating systems

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## 1. Introduction

Trying to establish a direct link between game violence and violent behavior depends on which side of the gaming industry you find yourself at, that is if you are a user, distributor or an academic.

Violence is used by distributors to sell more copies. More kills and more explosions mean more money. This is certainly the case with games like *Doom*, *Quake* and *Mortal Combat* that have sold millions of copies. Violent action has become more realistic than ever before and has become the goal of many games. For instance, if a player completes all levels of the game *Carmageddon*, a maximum of 33 000 people would have had to be killed.

Academics in various disciplines like psychology, education and criminology have investigated a possible link between violent games and its influence on the behaviour of children. They found that some computer games appear to have a bad influence on children while others do not. Some children play violent games and become violent. Other children play violent games and don't become more aggressive. Some children become violent without exposure to violent imagery. Others remain passive no matter what they play. While the search to establish a direct link still has to be proven, one thing however is undisputed: violent children watch violent movies and play violent electronic games.

This trend has intensified public concern regarding the potential harmful effects of electronic interactive games. As a result, legislative hearings on the issue have been held in several

countries and video game rating systems have been developed for use in the United States, Canada, Great Britain and Australia.

The use of the terms rating systems and censorship seems to intertwine on the Internet. Therefore it is necessary to distinguish between these terms to prevent any confusion for the purpose of this paper.

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## 2. Definition of terms

Censorship occurs when a restriction is placed on free speech or expression based on the concept that certain kinds of speech are of low social value and therefore classified as obscene. The government and lobby groups usually implement censorship. Owing to this restrictive nature, censorship is often surrounded in controversy as it is viewed by some as unconstitutional.

Rating systems are less restrictive and more informative than censorship and can be defined as an act of assigning a rank or value that has been pre-determined. For the purpose of this paper rating systems are used to indicate the age appropriateness of the content and requirements of the game.

There is however a grey area between censorship and rating systems which provides the opportunity for a rating system to function as a method of implementing censorship. A value is assigned to the content of Internet information whether it is a game or a Web site. According to the value assigned, Web browsers or filters are used to block the availability of the content and therefore the game or Web site is censored. This censorship by rating systems varies from individual to individual and depends on the individual's preference. The government does not implement it. The rating is conducted by human reviewers, computers and or a hybrid of the two (Online Rating Systems. [Online]).

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## 3. Rating systems

In Table 1, Cybercop, Netnanny and Cyberpatrol operate as rating systems that function by blocking software. Censorship is placed on content that has been rated by individual preference as inappropriate.

**Table 1 Examples of rating systems**

Cybercop, Netnanny, Cyberpatrol, Net Shepherd	Rating systems that function in the same way as censorship
Safesurf	Uses a combination of rating classification, filtering and parental education
Truste	Identifies Web sites that comply with acceptable privacy guidelines
Platform for Internet Content Selection (PICS)	Provides a framework for rating systems and is not a rating system in itself
EvaluWeb	Uses a computer to analyse document content

Objective Ratings Criteria (ORC)	Hybrid between third-party and self-rating
Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB)	Independent board that developed a standardized rating system for interactive entertainment software products. Provides specific information regarding age appropriateness
Recreational software Advisory Council (RSACI)	Provides information about the level of sex, nudity, violence and offensive language in software games and Web sites

Age appropriateness is a core element of many rating systems. Societies emphasize age owing to the fact that it establishes specific expectations of a person and enables the society to evaluate a person (Gerdes, 1988:11). Determining the age appropriateness of computer games will be indicative of the content of the game and if it is suitable or proper for a specific age group.

To illustrate how a rating system functions the Entertainment Software Board (ESRB) will be used as an example.

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#### 4. Recreational Software Advisory Council

This rating system was implemented in 1994 and most North American electronic game manufacturers have adopted the ESRB system.

The ESRB uses age appropriateness to form suitable categories as follows (About Entertainment Software Rating Board. [Online]):

*Early childhood (EC)*: Content is suitable for children ages three and older.

*Everyone (E)*: The content is suitable for people ages 6 and older. This category may contain minimal violent content, mild or strong language and/or suggestive themes.

*Teens (T)*: Contains content that is suitable for persons ages 13 years and older. Mild to strong language, violence and suggestive themes.

*Mature (M)*: The content is considered suitable for people 17 years and older. The product may include more intense violence or language than products in the Teen category. These titles may also indicate mature sexual themes.

*Adults only (AO)*: This content is suitable only for adults. The product may include graphic depictions of sex and/or violence. This product is not intended to be sold or rented to persons under the age of 18 years.

*Rating Pending (RP)*: This product has been submitted for rating.

Besides rating the age appropriateness of the game the ESRB also use content descriptors that offer additional information with regard to violence, language, sexual content and other descriptors, for example the use of tobacco or alcohol, drugs, etc.

The focus of this article is violence and therefore rating is explored according to the violence level.

The rating of the level of violence according to the ESRB is categorized in the following way:

- mild animated violence
- mild realistic violence
- comic mischief
- animated violence
- realistic violence
- animated blood and gore
- realistic blood and gore
- animated blood
- realistic blood.

Violence is often accompanied by the use of strong language and can contain sexual content. The ESRB used the categories of mild and strong language and the sexual content is divided into categories of suggestive themes, mature sexual themes and strong sexual content.

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## 5. Controversy of violence

The use of the term violence is often met with an emotional response. It represents not only physical and verbal force but also that which is viewed by society as unlawful and immoral. It can therefore be said that violence consists of moral, social and cognitive issues. An evaluation of the potential harm violence can have on children will have to be centred on their moral, cognitive and social development.

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## 6. Moral development

Moral development is one of the most important developmental stages of the pre-school child (2 to 6 years) as this is the age group when a child learns what is right and what is wrong. According to Kohlberg (Louw, Gerdes and Meyer, 1985:254), the child's behaviour is guided by the expectation to either receive an award or to prevent punishment. Children do not possess a moral system of their own but is in the process of acquiring standards. The person who the child learns from (authority figure) is therefore of utmost importance.

Towards the end of middle childhood (9 to 10 years) moral realism changes and in this stage the child realizes that moral rules can change and that society uses moral rules as a way of implementing social control. It is at this stage that the moral development of a child can be challenged and with goal-orientated guidance the child can develop his/her own moral thoughts.

At this stage the locus of control is very important: who is taking responsibility for his/her actions? Is the locus outside the child and is he/she blaming others for what has happened? The ideal is that the child develops an internal locus of control (Louw et al., 1985:328). By taking responsibility the child will bear the consequences of his/her actions.

At this stage, if a child is taking part in violent games, without adequate supervision and understanding, the senselessness and consequences of violence will not be emphasized, as it should be. Although computer games are highly interactive, it is far removed from reality as the consequences of violence are distorted because they are based on a reward system. Adequate and even ruthless violence allows one to continue to the next level, score more

points, obtain more lethal weapons, etc.

The adolescent years are the time when a person's value system is formed. This can only take place when the adolescent can distinguish between subjective and objective experiences, acquires respect and moves away from egocentrism.

Moral development empowers the child to develop and make choices. This could not be possible without considering the cognitive development of the child.

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## 7. Cognitive development

Cognition refers to all the processes whereby knowledge is acquired (Plug, Meyer, Louw and Gouws, 1986:181). According to Kohlberg the child between the ages of 3 and 4 years develops a sex specific concept with which he/she identifies. It is during this stage that a child learns to imitate the father or mother. Children also start to learn the type of behaviour associated with a specific sex. At this stage the child does not have the ability to tell the difference between real life and fantasy.

At the age of 7 the thought patterns and learning style of children change as they develop the capacity to reason. He/she is now also able to look at both sides of a situation and to compare situations that appear to be the same. Cognitive development has an important influence on the education of the child. During the middle years the child will learn more effectively if the learning process is accompanied by action. In other words, the child learns by doing specific activities.

One can therefore argue that the interactive nature of computer games is allowing the child to learn by doing specific activities.

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## 8. Social development

The social environment of the child of school going age increases drastically due to the exposure to the values, culture and norms of other children. Learning values and attitudes that are socially acceptable will contribute to socialization. It is the moral and cognitive development that contributes to the social development of the young child. Although a discussion of the social behaviour of children through to adolescence could explain the threat of violence, the consequences of violence can be accurately explained by discussing antisocial behaviour.

According to Prior (1994:3), aggression is one of the forms of antisocial behaviour and it is learned at a very early stage. Feshbach (1964) found that aggression can occur as early as the pre-school years. He distinguishes between adverse aggression and instrumental aggression. Adverse aggression is directed at a person. The aim of instrumental aggression is to acquire an object. Prior (1994:5) points out that if a pattern of aggressive behaviour is established by mid to late primary school age it is likely to remain a dominant characteristic of a child through adolescence to adulthood. The young child becomes desensitized to violence, which means that others who also partake in violent behaviour and aggressive reactions to conflict contribute to a general social culture in which such behaviour is acceptable, normative, inevitable and scarcely remarkable. The situation is complicated further by the child's increasing independence.

In summary: One can derive from this discussion that the developmental stage of the child will play a crucial role in determining the age appropriateness of the content of a game.

Children develop from a stage where right and wrong are set rules, and the realism that these moral values are determined by society, to questioning these moral values. From the age of three years children start to identify with role models. The virtual reality of characters in a game makes it possible for these children to associate and imitate the characters. This is complicated further by their inability to distinguish between fantasy and reality. In the same way that violence accumulates in games, so does aggressive behaviour accumulate into violent behaviour.

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## 9. Age appropriate violence

Rating systems often use terms that cover a wide variety and intensity of behaviour. For example the ESRB refers to mild animated violence and mild realistic violence. To distinguish which one is more acceptable for a specific age would be impossible. On the one hand you might have physical violence with real-life characters, but the violence is not accompanied by dramatic or graphic effects. Mild animated violence could be viewed as less serious due to the animation of the characters. The irony lies in the fact that the impact of violence is no less than when it is animated or realistic. The animated nature could in fact contribute to the desensitization of the child due to the fact that the consequences of the violence are not realistic. The ESRB's classification allows minimal violence from the age of 6 years. This could be questioned.

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## 10. Game violence and parenting

Parents can reduce the effect of electronic violence by:

- monitoring the games the child plays;
- knowing what types of rating systems are available;
- reading the content description of rating systems; and
- not relying only on rating systems, that is knowing the content and requirements of the game.

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## 11. Conclusion

The Internet is often called a global village, suggesting a close-knit community that shares common values, norms and experiences. This metaphor is misleading as many cultures coexist on the Internet – cultures that can clash at times. The purpose of this paper is not to prove the link between aggressive behaviour and violent games, but one should take into account that there is public as well as individual good in reducing exposure to and acceptance of aggressive behaviour.

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