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Age ratings on video games: Are they effective?

There is a growing amount of literature that has examined the content of video games and its effect on players. The majority of this research has been carried out on children and adolescents although lots of games are specifically developed for adult gamers. However, many of the games aimed at the '18+' market appear to be played by teenagers. This raises interesting questions about whether age ratings on video games are effective.

Video game content and age ratings: A brief overview

A study by Thompson, Tepichin and Haninger (2006) attempted to quantify the depiction of violence, blood, sexual themes, profanity, substances, and gambling in adult (18+) video games and to assess whether the actual game content matched the content descriptor on the packaging. Although content descriptors for violence and blood provided a good indication of content in 36 video games they examined, the authors concluded that 81% of the games studied

(n=29) lacked content descriptors of other non-violent adult content. Interestingly, other studies carried out by the same research team have found that despite age ratings, adult content can be found in lots of games aimed at young children and teenagers (Thompson & Haninger, 2001; Haninger & Thompson, 2004).

Research conducted by Walsh, Gentile and van Brederode (2002) tested the validity of media rating systems (including video games). Results showed that when the entertainment industry rated a product as inappropriate for children, parents also agreed that it was inappropriate. However, parents disagreed with many industry ratings that were designated as containing material as suitable for children. It was also concluded that products rated as appropriate for adolescents by the industry were of the greatest concern to parents.

A major review by Bushman and Cantor (2003) examined research on the implementation of media-rating systems and reported that although a majority of

parents report using media-rating systems, their understanding of the systems is low. The same paper also carried out a meta-analysis of experiments testing the effects of ratings on children's interest in television programmes. The authors concluded that ratings for restricted or controversial content had a deterrent effect for young children (below the age of 8 years) but that, by the age of 11 years of age, the ratings show a small enticement effect that is more pronounced among boys.

To what extent do adolescents play 'adult' video games?

To date, there has been surprisingly little research on the playing of adult games by adolescents. This section briefly overviews the main findings of a small study I was involved in as part of a television documentary. In this study, a quota sample comprising 223 adolescents aged between 11 and 14 years (112 boys and 111 girls) participated. The data were collected via face-to-face interview by a market research company (LVQ Research Ltd) as part of a monthly Children's Omnibus survey. Sampling points for fieldwork were selected from a stratified random sample of 21 local authority areas across England and Scotland.

63% had played an adult video game

Adolescents were asked if they had ever played an (adult) 18+ video game and almost two-thirds of the sample had (63%). Boys were more likely than girls to have played an 18+ video game with three-quarters of the boys (76%) and half the girls (49%) claiming to do so. Results also showed that the older the child the more likely they were to have ever played them with 37% of 11-year olds having ever played an 18+ certificate video game, 54% of 12-year olds, 78% of 13-year olds, and 82% of 14-year olds. Older boys aged 13 to 14 years old were most likely to have ever played an 18+ video game (87%). This was followed by 13

to 14 year old girls (73%), 11 to 12 year old boys (66%), and 11 to 12 year old girls (35%).

Adolescents were also asked about how often they played 18+ video games (see Table 1). Of the two-thirds who had played them, 8% reported playing them "all the time", 22% reported playing them "most of the time", 50% reported playing them "sometimes", 18% reported playing them "hardly ever" (the remaining 2% gave no response). Boys were more likely than girls to play 18+ video games more frequently but there was little difference when compared by age.

All adolescents were also asked how they got access to 18+ plus video games (see Table 2). The majority had the games bought for them by family or friends (58%), played them at a friend's house (35%), swapped them with friends (27%), or bought games themselves (5%). There were few differences by either gender or age.

All the adolescents were asked about all the video games they played regularly and what age certificate they had. The results showed that 35% played 7+ certificate video games regularly, 66% played 12+ games regularly, 70% played 15+ games regularly, 49% played 16+ games regularly and 38% played 18+ games regularly. Boys (48%) were more likely than girls (28%) to have played an 18+ video game. By far the most popular games among those that had played 18+ games were those in the *Grand Theft Auto* series with 75% of those having played an 18+ game (79% of boys, 68% of girls; 78% of 13 and 14 year olds, 71% of 11 and 12 year olds).

Conclusions

Although this was a only a small self-report survey, the findings of this study indicate that adult (18+) video games are regularly played by young adolescents, particularly boys. Furthermore, it would appear that the age rating given to a video game does not seem to be a significant barrier in preventing adolescents playing games that are designed for adult use. It

may be the case that the 18+ rating makes the video game a more attractive product for adolescents to play and perhaps provides support to the work of Bushman and Cantor (2003) who concluded that prohibitive age ratings for various media show a small enticement effect that is more pronounced among boys.

The findings also indicate that families may be complicit in buying age-restricted games for their children. It could perhaps be speculated that a large proportion of parents may be totally unaware of what exactly the adult content of these games is (especially as the content descriptors may not give an accurate reflection of the game according to Thompson and colleagues [2006]), and may not use the age ratings as they do with other products such as television or programmes or films on DVD. The findings suggest that parents and other family members perhaps need their awareness raised about the age ratings on games and why they are there, and that they need to take their parental

responsibility duties seriously and adopt a more proactive role in the video games they allow their children to play.

References

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Table 1: Frequency of playing (adult) 18+ video games by age and gender

	Sample	Age		Gender	
		11-12	13-14	Boys	Girls
Base: 11-14 year olds	%	%	%	%	%
All of the time	5	4	7	10	1
Most of the time	14	13	14	22	5
Sometimes	31	20	43	34	29
Hardly ever	12	9	14	11	12
Don't know	1	1	1	0	2
Don't play 18+ games	37	54	20	24	51

Table 2: How adolescents obtain (adult) 18+ video games by age and gender

	Sample	Age		Gender	
		11-12	13-14	Boys	Girls
Base: 11-14 year olds	%	%	%	%	%
Bought by family/friends	58	53	61	56	62
Play at friend's house	35	35	35	33	39
Swap with friends	27	27	27	32	19
Buy myself	5	4	6	6	2