

FTC Consumer Alert

Federal Trade Commission ■ Bureau of Consumer Protection ■ Office of Consumer & Business Education

Video Games: Reading the Ratings on the Games People Play

Video and computer games are popular among people of all ages. A recent study by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that 83 percent of children aged 8 to 18 live in homes with a video game console, and that 40 percent of them have the console in their bedroom.

The content of today's video and computer games varies widely. According to the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), the nation's consumer protection agency, game packages have information about the content that can help renters and buyers decide whether a particular game is suitable before they take it home.

The Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB), set up by the entertainment software industry's trade association, maintains a two-part rating system for video and computer games: the **rating symbol**, such as E or M, which suggests the game's age appropriateness and appears on the front of the game box; and **content descriptors**, like *Blood and Gore*, which point out specific elements of the game that have caused the rating and that may be of concern. They appear on the back of the box.

The ESRB also maintains a website, www.esrb.org, where visitors can enter the name of a game to see its rating and the descriptions of its content. The ESRB notes that ratings should be only one factor in the decision to buy or rent a particular game: personal taste, standards, and knowledge of what's best for one's family also come into play.

The FTC notes that players can change the content of a rated game by downloading software from the Internet onto their computers. These programs, called "mods," are created by game enthusiasts, and can make a game's content more explicit than the rating indicates, and in turn, inappropriate for players like kids and teens. In addition, the ESRB says there's no rating for content created by online players of a game, and that these games have a notice that says "Game Experience May Change During Online Play."

Additional information about video and computer game content is available from parent groups and advocacy organizations that rate games according to criteria they've developed. Search engines on the web can point to these and other sources of information on game content.

Reading the Ratings

The ESRB's rating symbols and content descriptors try to offer a guide to the themes and depictions to help consumers make selections. But they can be difficult to interpret unless you are familiar with the industry's definitions.

- Games rated **AO** (Adult Only) have content that is suitable only for people 18 and older. These games may include "prolonged scenes of **intense violence** and/or graphic sexual content and nudity." According to the ESRB, intense violence means graphic and realistic-looking depictions of physical conflict, extreme and realistic blood, gore, weapons, and depictions of human injury and death. Strong sexual content includes graphic references to and depictions of sexual behavior, possibly including nudity.
- Games rated **M** (Mature) "have content that may be suitable for people over 17," and may contain "**intense violence, blood and gore, sexual content, and strong language**." According to the ESRB, games rated M could include scenes showing the mutilation of body parts, graphic references and depictions of sexual behavior, and frequent or explicit profanity in addition to graphic and realistic-looking depictions of physical conflict, extreme and realistic blood, gore, weapons, and depictions of human injury and death.

- Games rated **T** (Teen) have content that may be suitable for kids over 13. They may contain “**violence, suggestive themes, crude humor, minimal blood and the use of strong language.**” Specifically, the ESRB describes violence as involving aggressive conflict; suggestive themes as mild provocative references or materials; crude humor as depictions or dialogue involving “vulgar antics including ‘bathroom humor;’” and strong language as the use of profanity.
- Games rated **E10+** (Everyone 10 and older) have content that may be suitable for kids at least 10. These games may contain “**more cartoon, fantasy, or mild violence, mild language, and/or minimal suggestive themes.**” The ESRB describes cartoon violence as “violent actions involving cartoon-like situations and characters,” and “violence where a character is unharmed after the action has been inflicted.” Further, the organization describes fantasy violence as violent actions of a fantasy nature, involving human or non-human characters in situations easily distinguishable from real life; and mild violence as mild scenes depicting characters in unsafe and violent situations. Suggestive themes are described as having mild provocative reference or materials, and mild language is defined as mild to moderate use of profanity.
- Games rated **E** (Everyone) have content that may be suitable for kids at least 6, and may contain “minimal **cartoon, fantasy or mild violence** and/or the infrequent use of **mild language.**” Mild violence is defined as “mild scenes depicting characters in unsafe and/or violent situations.”
- Games rated **EC** (Early Childhood) have content that is intended for preschoolers at least 3. The ESRB says games with an EC rating contain no material that parents would find inappropriate.
- Games rated **RP** (Rating Pending) are awaiting final rating from the ESRB. The symbol appears only in advertising for a game before it has been rated.

Decoding the Descriptors

The ESRB uses 32 different descriptors to provide information about what’s in a game. For example, according to the ESRB, *Animated Blood* means discolored and unrealistic depictions of blood, while *Blood* refers to depictions of blood, and *Blood and Gore* means depictions of blood or the mutilation of body parts, as well. *Violence* refers to scenes involving “aggressive conflict;” *Fantasy Violence* is intended to be easily distinguishable from real life; *Mild Violence* depicts characters in unsafe or violent situations; *Sexual Violence* refers to depictions of rape or other violent sexual acts, and *Intense Violence* refers to graphic and realistic-looking blood, gore, weapons, and depictions of human injury and death. *Sexual Themes* indicates “mild to moderate sexual references or depictions,” and possibly, partial nudity. Other content descriptors refer to alcohol, comic mischief, crude humor, drugs, gambling, language (profanity), mature humor, nudity, and the like.

The ESRB says its members’ advertising and promotional and marketing materials are monitored by the Advertising Review Council, a group that defines standards for advertising practices for interactive games, and monitors compliance among members of the industry.

To complain about a game rating or advertisement, visit www.esrb.org or www.ftc.gov.

The FTC works for the consumer to prevent fraudulent, deceptive, and unfair business practices in the marketplace and to provide information to help consumers spot, stop, and avoid them. To file a complaint or to get free information on consumer issues, visit ftc.gov or call toll-free, 1-877-FTC-HELP (1-877-382-4357); TTY: 1-866-653-4261. The FTC enters Internet, telemarketing, identity theft, and other fraud-related complaints into Consumer Sentinel, a secure, online database available to hundreds of civil and criminal law enforcement agencies in the U.S. and abroad.

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