ESRB VS. PEGI: WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE?

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If Game Tycoon 2 has taught me anything, it’s that making a game sure is tough. There’s more to game development than just creative design — there’s the production, legal, and marketing aspects that must be taken into consideration as well. Perhaps one of the most boring, uninspiring parts of video game-making is acquiring a rating — a standard procedure, especially for AAA games. Typically, they go through the ESRB, or Entertainment System Ratings Board, to receive a rating. However, there’s been a rise in popularity favouring the PEGI, or Pan European Game Information, as more and more regions begin to adopt the system.

*So, what are these rating boards anyway, and what’s the difference between them?*

Like most things in video game history, the ESRB was born out of controversy. Up until the early 90s, games were released with little regulation in regard to content and accessibility — you only knew what was in the game if you played it or a friend forgot to say “spoiler alert” before telling you the juicy details. This is how games like Custer’s Revenge and Night Trap were able to be published, despite them being terrible and rape-y.

The straw that broke the camel’s back was the beloved Mortal Kombat, a game deemed too violent and too mature for children that politicians decided it was time for them to officially meddle in video games. After years of interference, it was agreed that a rating system was needed to let parents know what kind of content their kids were absorbing through those scary, technologically advanced, new-fangled gizmos and gadgets. Much like movie ratings, the ESRB would evaluate game content and slap a letter on the game box that would indicate what age group it was appropriate for.

Simple, right? Not so much. As a former GameStop employee, I can’t even begin to tell you how many parents didn’t understand the ESRB ratings. I would have adults coming in with their 8-year-olds expecting their child to pick a harmless game to play. The kids would plead with their mother for the next GTA or CoD, and the parents would come up to the counter like it was a Mario or Kirby title — a game’s a game, right? Only I’d have to explain to them that the games their child wanted were essentially “rated R” and that “you have to acknowledge that we had this conversation in front of my supervisor; otherwise, you’ll accuse me of not explaining the concept of an ‘M’ rating to you when you come back after an hour of gameplay trying to return the game because it’s ‘too violent’, causing me to lose my job”.

It would seem that “E”, “T” and “M”, the three most common ESRB ratings, are just too complicated for parents to understand. The verbose content descriptors also fail to draw the eye, leaving the parent uninformed. Isn’t there anything easier? Something that readily tells parents and children alike what age group the game is meant for?

Enter the PEGI, the rating system based around numbers that translate to what age the game would be appropriate for. No more guessing what “M” or “T” means — with the PEGI, ratings such as “3”, “7”, “12”, “16”, and “18” easily convey what age group the game is meant for (note: this does not mean that the game’s difficulty is age-accordant…I checked, and Katamari Forever is a “3” on the PEGI so that’s proof enough). The PEGI also has small icons indicating the presence of violence, sex, drugs, and other age-appropriate themes, making it comprehensible across language barriers. Perhaps this is one of the many reasons why 30+ countries have already adopted it, including parts of Canada and Mexico. It is simply easier for the consumer to understand.

On the developer’s side, the battle rages over which is better. From a cost comparison standpoint, PEGI appears to be the winner, as the PEGI charges $300 – $2400 USD for a one-platform rating while the ESRB charges anywhere from $800 – $4,000 USD depending on the game’s development cost. However, the ESRB costs are a one-time thing; once the rating is received, it’s the same across all platforms, be it XBox, PlayStation, Nintendo or PC. The PEGI, on the other hand, charges a fee for each platform, meaning that there’s a fee for the XBox rating, a separate fee for the PlayStation rating, etc. etc. despite the fact that it’s the exact same content throughout. This may be no problem for the big league players like Square Enix and Bandai Namco, but it poses a problem for the indie developers trying to squeeze every possible penny.

Choosing a rating system is like choosing a security guard — they do their job with no real reinforcement power yet are considered a necessary evil. Getting a rating for a game may not be the most enthralling experience, but it is still a necessary part of video games. With these ratings, parents can guide their children through increasingly more adult-centred content and find a game that is suitable for their age just like movies. Whatever the system used, the PEGI and ESRB continue to quietly battle it out, unbeknownst to consumers everywhere, for the top spot as “the one and only video game rating board”.

* How do the two regulators differ? Which one do you feel is the most effective?
* Assassin’s Creed III: Liberation was given an 18 cert by the VSC / PEGI. What do you think the main classification issues were?