

Thank you for the opportunity to give my input on reviewing Australian media classification.

I have enjoyed playing video games as a hobby and past time since my early childhood in the mid 1990's, and have followed the industry with a passion throughout my teenage and adult life.

As a young adult, I was happy to see that Australia introduced an R18+ classification for video games, allowing more adult-oriented video games (not necessarily with explicit sexual content, but rather content clearly aimed for a mature adult audience, as opposed to children or teenagers) to be experienced by adult Australians. In arguing for this classification, I likened mature-targeted video games to mature-targeted films – some of the greatest films of all time are restricted to an adult rating, so why would a mature video game experience be any different? I was very glad when the decision was made to expand video game classification in this country to encompass a more modern view, and modern audience of adult gamers. I believe this is an excellent step in the right direction, even if some more controversial content instantly bypasses this rating and means a video game must be censored or refused classification.

In more recent years, however, I have seen video games transition from a platform for entertainment and fun, to money-making machines and vectors of gambling and addiction. This is not true across the board (with some smaller teams delivering exceptional video games, and focussing on delivering a brilliant product that they are passionate about), however as a consumer of video games from a wide range of sources, it is clear that the major companies nowadays are more interested in profits through the addition of 'microtransactions', randomised rewards and 'lootboxes'.

Back in the day, when you bought a video game, everything was on the disk/cartridge. You owned all the content of that video game, and could hold it in the palm of your hand. Even as late as the mid-2000's, video games were updated or 'patched' to include new content, with no further payment required past the original purchase price. Nowadays with the rise of digital media, publishers release their games (often in an unfinished state, to meet deadlines) having already passed classification and received a rating/warnings, and are patched to a complete state post-launch, or to include microtransactions. In some cases, this can be relatively harmless (a cash shop where you may buy cosmetic items, and support a game you have purchased – this allows the developers to continue working on a game, as they are provided additional income), however it also has the potential to be incredibly predatory (allowing purchases of 'lootboxes' (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Loot_box), whereby a random reward is provided from a pool of rewards of varying levels of rarity). Randomised rewards are an especially grey area in terms of legality, as you are provided a reward for your purchase (akin to a kinder surprise or toy in a sealed bag), however (in my opinion) provides an avenue for gambling addiction in children. I have heard of cases where adults who are gambling addicts turned to video games to deal with their addiction, only to become addicted to the randomised rewards available from lootboxes. This gambling aspect is adamantly denied by publishers (see example from publisher Electronic Arts <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nVYEqaFZJWo>), however it is the case that if a precedent is set, all companies that use this method of monetisation will lose out. Electronic Arts recent financial reports indicate that the majority of their revenue is coming from after-purchase monetisation, as opposed to game sales themselves (see <https://www.gamespot.com/articles/ea-made-almost-1-billion-on-microtransactions-last/1100-6473240/>).

To extend this point further, mobile games (video games on your phone) nowadays are usually 'free to play', but are built to annoy the player with 'roadblocks' (time-locks on progression, requiring payment or usage of consumable items – which are available for purchase – to bypass prematurely) to encourage purchases from the in-game store. I understand that this is necessary for the company to make money, however it is clear that the scope of video games has changed from a single up-front

payment, to nickel-and-dime consumers for everything they can afford to spend. This is especially dangerous for children, given that as the games are free to install, parents may see no immediate harm in installing a free-to-play game to entertain their kids, but may inadvertently introduce them to a gambling-like experience.

I guess the most important thing I want to see in modern video game classification is that post-launch changes to the product which introduce additional monetisation methods (especially randomised rewards akin to gambling) are captured and represented in a video game's rating. This was the case with last year's 'Crash Team Racing: Nitro Fueled', which released (appearing as) a complete product/experience, but had microtransactions patched in post-launch (see <https://www.destructoid.com/activision-s-post-launch-microtransactions-are-the-peak-of-anti-consumer-practices-562857.phtml>). As a result, the 'online purchases' aspect of the rating did not appear on boxes, but was a part of the game upon updating it to the latest version.

It is frustrating to watch as my favourite past time becomes increasingly profit-driven and money-hungry, however more importantly, I hope that such anti-consumer practises can be captured in the video-game classification process in order to protect children from the dangers of gambling addiction.

Thank you for your time,

Sam