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The Rise of the ESRB

As technology begins to progress more rapidly, we start to lose track of the effect it has on society. The allure of progression can sometimes cloud our better judgement as we strive for greatness. When video games began their climb towards becoming the entertainment giant they are today, nobody was able to say for sure what effect they would have on humanity. At that point it was a race to see who could create the better, more impressive console/machine, as well as the games to be played on them. Developers didn't pay much attention to the impact their creations could have on their consumers. As video games became more and more popular, they began to attract more attention from the media, government, and consumers alike.

With video games now directly in the public eye, strong opinions would be formed about them by many people. Considering the American people enjoy little to no restrictions on their creativity and expression of creative ideas, the range of games being released to the public is rather wide. While creative freedom is generally considered to be a good thing, some eyes are not meant to see certain things. The outcome of total creative freedom can lead to some really intense and messed up material. Being able to openly release this material to the public means that anyone with the money to purchase it can do so. This means children or parents who are unaware of the harshness of the game they are looking to buy may stumble upon something that was not intended for young audiences at all. Surely parents would be outraged by their children being exposed to games like this without a proper warning.

In 1992, the United States government expressed their growing concern for violence in video games and children's exposure to such games. Senators Herb Kohl and Joe Lieberman took part in a congressional hearing against the game industry marketing such violent games to minors. *Mortal Kombat* was the most prominent example of an intensely violent game being indiscriminately distributed to anyone with the money and will to play it. It received the most flak from parents and the government alike. In response to the negative publicity that the game industry was getting, SEGA decided to create a rating system for any game that is able to be played on SEGA hardware. The Videogame Rating Council, or VRC for short, was SEGA's way of informing their consumers of the possible violence or mature content in the games they allowed on their systems. Unfortunately for SEGA, their response to the issue was not good enough for congress and their rating system was rejected. Nintendo tried their hand with a different approach. They believed that by censoring their games to remove the blood, gore, and otherwise mature content, that they could market every Nintendo game as appropriate for all players. Again, congress was unsatisfied by the response to the issue as they did not agree with Nintendo's claim.

Congress began to grow impatient and threatened to force government intervention in the regulation of video game distribution if something was not done quickly. Senator Joe Lieberman presented the Video Games Rating Act of 1994 which

would give the American government the power to establish a rating system for all game distribution to follow. Many game developers came together and formed the Interactive Digital Software Association to try and create a universal rating system that would satisfy congress in response to this proposal. SEGA proposed to the group that they could all adopt the VRC rating system as an industry standard. Unsurprisingly, most of the other members of the IDSA we're not fond of the idea. Nintendo especially had an issue with adopting a rival company's rating system as they thought it would make it seem like they were in collaboration with SEGA. The group had to come up with a rating standard that all the companies could get behind, without one company spearheading its creation. In July of 1994 the IDSA presented a video game rating system to congress that they would recognize as the universal standard, they called it the Entertainment Software Rating Board. Although not too far off from SEGA's original rating system, the system was different enough to satisfy the other companies. The ESRB came out with five different ratings for games (Early Childhood/EC, Kids to Adults/K-A, Teen/T, Mature/M, and Adults Only/AO) along with seventeen content descriptions to more accurately convey the reason for the rating to their consumers. Congress was now satisfied with the result and on September 1, 1994 the ESRB began rating games.

While the rating system was not required by law, a majority of hardware distributors as well as retailers required a rating for the game to be sold on their system/in their store. Most developers recognized the importance of having the ESRB rate their game and submitted their games for review. Naturally, the ESRB did not intend on putting hours of time into reviewing gameplay and scenes without some form of compensation. They realized that some projects/companies just don't have limitless pockets to pull money from and established a pricing convention for their ratings. If a game's development cost more than \$250,000 then they would charge the company \$4,000 for the rating. Alternately, if a games development cost less than \$250,000 then the fee for rating would be dropped to \$800. Most developers were sensible enough to realize that the cost of rating would be far less than the money lost when retailers and hardware companies didn't allow their games to be sold.

As the ESRB rapidly became the industry rating standard, the IDSA started to expand. A year after its creation they created a code of conduct to be followed for all advertisements. Two years following that, the ESRB created ratings and content descriptions for websites as well as a notice of online interaction in games that allowed online play. In 1998 the ESRB changed the K-A rating to E for Everyone as it fit the description more accurately. In 2000 they established an enforcement system to penalize companies that refused to comply with ESRB standards. In 2003 the IDSA decided to rename themselves and became the Entertainment Software Association, or ESA. In 2005 the ESRB added a sixth rating category, E10+ for everyone ten and up, in order to broaden the market for younger children. The ESA continued to stretch its ratings and conduct conventions into as many fields of electronic entertainment as possible, eventually even including the modern virtual reality games as well as mobile apps/games. Over time the ESRB became a major force in game rating and eventually claimed an 87% compliance percentage which by industry standard is remarkably high.

For over 25 years the ESRB has been on top of the rating game and continues to expand their horizons. It is safe to say that the association will remain the lead electronic content reviewer and conduct enforcer for a long time to come as long as it continues to grow as it has. The association has shown no malicious intent and it has not faltered in its endeavors to bring the video game community together. Now that it is clear that the ESRB will not be going away any time soon, the focus turns to both the gaming community and the developers. While the introduction of the ESRB into the gaming world hasn't brought too many enforced changes on the way games are released and consumed, it has changed the way society reacts to them. Without explicitly doing so, the ESRB's founding has created a general boundary for which game devs have freedom to work within. With the expansion of ratings and content descriptions we can expect to see more thought put into the development as well as the advertisement of future games. A new standard of video games has been put in place by the ESRB and it will force future designers to really think about the content they are putting in games and how it will be viewed by the public. This could potentially slow the release of new games as the developers need to be more meticulous with their work and truly follow the standard of the rating they are striving to reach. While it may delay certain games a bit, the ESRB's creation could also diversify the game industry greatly while also expanding its room for developers. Now that ratings are a core thought in the development of games, companies can start to find their niche game rating or even expand their employee count in order to create teams that specialize in a certain type of rating. This would negate the release delay caused by worry of a game not following a certain rating guideline by generating teams of specialized designers capable of producing their games at a standard pace. With designers following the ESRB standard we can expect to see an incline in trust among the game industry and its customers. If parents and governments can be certain that a game rating will prepare their consumers for the possible malicious content in the game then the sale of video games to the more skeptical and prude demographic will start to see an incline and possibly skyrocket in the future.

The introduction of the ESRB into the entertainment industry was a rather small yet highly impactful point in history. Eclipsed by the amazing progression of electronics in the past few decades, the ESRB has become a hero in the shadows. Preventing the government from intruding on the entertainment industry any more than it has to is a more power to the people. Being able to establish industry standards for all electronic entertainment companies as a collective association is a massive step up in creative freedom. Developers enjoy the ability to follow a general standard when designing games marketed towards a certain demographic. All game consumers have the luxury of knowing what sorts of content may be in a game they are about to purchase. The power of knowledge is sometimes overlooked in America, but the ESRB continues to inform the public on what they need to know before coming across content they didn't wish to see.

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