# Age Classification of the Existing Digital Game Content Rating System Across the World: A Comparative Analysis

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## ABSTRACT

The negative effects of playing digital game with harmful content demonstrate that children indeed need to be protected. Thus, many countries implemented digital game content rating system with age classification to prevent the youngsters from playing age-inappropriate games which might be harmful to them. Although their ratings is claimed to be based on child development theories, however, it is found that different countries introduced different age classification. Unfortunately, Malaysia does not have its own digital game content rating system. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to analyse the current age classification in the existing content rating system across the world that can be used as a standard in developing a model of Malaysia digital game content rating system guideline. In order to achieve this objective, content analysis had been done by doing a comprehensive comparative analysis of ten existing content rating system across the world. As a result, it is found that there are fourteen different category of age classification that are 0+, 3+, 6+, 7+, 10+, 12+, 13+, 14+, 15+, 16+, 17+, 18+, banned and others. The differences of age category implemented by these countries, show their emphasis in protecting specific target users.

**Keywords**: Age classification, digital game, content rating system.

## I    INTRODUCTION

Today, the popularity of digital games as a main source of entertainment among people over the world rivals other media products such as television programs and films. The increasing popularity of digital games has gained peoples' attention due to their detrimental effects, especially on the development of children and adolescents.

In fact, the existence of negative contents such as violence, sex, profanity, religious insultation, illegal drug, tobacco, alcohol and many more have also triggered digital game as the subject of recurrent controversy (Zanuddin, 2008). In Malaysia, a few digital games such as Grand Theft Auto series, Manhunt series and Mortal Kombat have raised a huge controversy due to their sexual content and extreme impact violence. Furthermore, in September 2017, another digital game entitled *Fight of Gods* was banned due to its religious insultation content. *Fight of Gods* is the game that features religious figures as fight characters. All of these controversial game consist of the contents that are obviously contrary to our culture, religion and country regulations.

Besides that, studies by previous researchers also found that playing digital games with harmful contents may lead to negative effects, especially to the youngsters (Gentile, Lynch, Linder, & Walsh, 2004). As content is found to play a big role in shaping the values and attitudes of the digital game players, particularly for children and adolescents (Tamborini et al., 2017), therefore, it is very important to filter and control the content. Thus, digital game content rating system was introduced to warn consumers, especially parents of the harmful content.

Basically, ratings can be divided into two typical types that are evaluative and descriptive. Evaluative or also known as age-based ratings suggest the suitable age for consuming media products while descriptive or also known as content-based ratings provide information regarding the content of media products (Gosselt, De Jong, & Van Hoof, 2012; Ross & Miller, 2013).

In line with the goal of the establishment of the digital content rating system that are to protect the minor and inform the user regarding its content (Gentile, Humphrey, & Walsh, 2005), therefore, by using the age-based ratings, user can easily select the suitable media product that matches with their needs, without getting through the entire content.

## II    EXISTING CONTENT RATING SYSTEM

Just like watching television, parents are worried about the impacts of digital game playing on their children, especially those digital games that contain potentially harmful content such as sex and violence that upholds contradict values to their beliefs (Jiow, Athwa, Chew, Elias, & Woo, 2017).

Thus, it is very important to have rating systems as a guide to protect the youngsters from unsuitable content which is inappropriate for their age, particularly with increasing evidence showing that

there is a significant relation between parental control and games impacts on children's behaviour (Gentile et al., 2004).

Therefore, many countries introduced digital game content rating system as the platform to inform the user, especially parents regarding the content of the digital games that they wish to consume.

Unfortunately, Malaysia does not have its own digital game content rating system (Hamid & Shiratuddin, 2016). Therefore, the purpose of this article is to identify and analyze the current age classification used in the existing digital game content rating system across the world that can be used as a standard in developing a model of Malaysia digital game content rating system guideline. In order to achieve this objective, content analysis had been done by doing a comprehensive comparative analysis. This study involved ten existing content rating system across the world. The details of the study will be discussed in the next section.

## III COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE EXISTING CONTENT RATING SYSTEM ACROSS THE WORLD FOCUSING ON AGE CLASSIFICATION

In this study, a comparative analysis of ten existing digital game content rating system across the world which represent Europe, United States (which also covers Mexico and Canada), Asia, South America and global standard (default rating for the country that does not have its own rating) focusing on age classification was done. Below are the details of the selected rating system:

1. Pan European Game Information (PEGI), Europe
2. Entertainment Software Self-Regulation Body/ Unterhaltungssoftware Selbstkontrolle (USK), Germany
3. Australian Classification Board (ACB), Australia
4. Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB), United States, Mexico, Canada
5. Entertainment Software Rating Association (ESRA), Iran
6. Computer Entertainment Rating Organization (CERO), Japan
7. Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA), Singapore
8. Game Content Rating Board (GCRB), Korea
9. Department of Justice, Rating, Titles and Qualification (DJCTQ), Brazil
10. International Age Rating Coalition (IARC), Global rating standard

Table 1 and Table 2 show the mentioned studies on the age classification with commonalities.

Finding from table 1 shows that there are various age classification categories used by all of these ten existing rating system worldwide ranging from 0+ to 18+. Overall, thirty seven rating category were identified that are EC, E, PG, G, GA, All, A, 0+, 3+, 6+, 7+, E10+, PG 10, 12+, PG 12, B, T, PG 14, 15+, M, MA15+, C, 16+, PG 16, Age Advisory 16, M, D, 18+, PG 18, R18+, AO, Z, M, RC, RP, NAR and T. Among all, the United States have the most age classification categories that are seven while Singapore has the least that are three. Australia and Brazil both have six. Followed by Europe, Germany, Iran, Japan, Korea and IARC which have five.

Although there are thirty seven categories of age classification, however, it is found that some of the classifications are actually similar but classified differently due to the differences in term of their terminology. For example, rating 3+ (PEGI, Europe), G (ACB, Australia), A (CERO, Japan), All (GRB, Korea) and GA (DJCTQ, Brazil) is referring to similar age groups as 0+ (USK, Germany), that is for persons with the age of 0 and over or in the other words it is suitable for all ages. Furthermore, not all countries use numeral in representing their age rating. The United States represent using EC, E, E10+, T, M, AO, and RP while Japan uses an alphabet that are A, B, C, D and Z. Due to this matter, thus, age classification with different terminology or representation, but similar definition in Table 1 was then grouped together under a similar category. This produced new fourteen categories that are 0+, 3+, 6+, 7+, 10+, 12+, 13+, 14+, 15+, 16+, 17+, 18+, Banned and Others as can be seen via Table 2.

Table 2 shows age category, the breakdown of age classification of the existing rating system based on its similarity and its total. A total of ten similar age classification rating is found under 18+ category. This is followed by 12+ category that is seven, 0+ and 15+ category that are six, 16+ category that is five, 3+ and 7+ category that are three, 6+, 10+, 17+, Banned and Others category that are 2, and finally, 13+ and 14+ category that are one.

Although most of the content rating stated that their age classification is based on child development theories, however, it is found that different country implemented different category of age classification to adapt to their needs. This is probably due to their differences in term of culture, religion and political aspects (Dogruel & Joeckel, 2013; Stefan Piasecki, 2016). Furthermore, different country also subjected to different law of children. For example, in the USK Guideline of Computer and Video

**Table 1. Comparative Analysis of Ten Existing Content Rating System Across the World Focusing on Age Classification**

AGE CLASSIFICATION

| EXISTING RATING SYSTEM | EC | E 0+ | PG 10 | 12+ | PG 12 | E10+ (12+) | T (13+) | 14 | C (15+) | MA 15+ (15+) | PG 16 | AGE ADV 16 | M (17+) | D (17+) | 18+ | PG 18 | R 18+ | AO (18+) | Z (18+) | M 18 | RC | RP | NAR | T |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. PEGI | | | | √ | | | | | | | | | | | √ | | | | | | | | | |
| 2. USK | | √ | | √ | | | √ | | | | | | √ | | | √ | | | | | | | | |
| 3. ACB | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | √ | | | √ | | | √ | |
| 4. ESRB | √ | | | | √ | | | | √ | | | | √ | | | | | √ | | | | √ | | |
| 5. ESRA | | | | √ | | | | | √ | | | | | | √ | | | | | | | | | |
| 6. CERO | | | √ | | | | | | | | | | | √ | | | | | √ | | | | | |
| 7. MDA | | | | | | | | | | | | √ | | | | | | | | √ | | | √ | |
| 8. GRB | | | √ | | √ | | | | √ | | | | | | √ | | | | | | | | √ | |
| 9. DJCTQ | | √ | | | √ | | | | | | | | √ | | | √ | | | | | | | | |
| 10. IARC | | | | √ | | | | | | | √ | | | | √ | | | | | | | | | |

*NOTE:*

**1. PEGI:**
**3+** = suitable for all age groups
**7+** = only suitable for those aged seven and above
**12+** = only suitable for those aged twelve and above
**16+** = only suitable for those aged sixteen and above
**18+** = only suitable for adults aged eighteen and above

**2. USK:**
**0+** = Approved without age restriction
**6+** = Approved for children aged 6 and above
**12+** = Approved for children aged 12 and above
**16+** = Approved for children aged 16 and above
**18+** = Not approved for young persons aged under 18

**3. ACB:**
**PG** = Parental Guidance (not recommended for viewing or playing by persons under 15 without guidance from parents or guardians)
**G** = The G classification is suitable for everyone
**M** = Recommended for teenagers aged 15 years and above. Children under 15 may legally access this material because it is an advisory category.
**MA 15+** = Legally restricted. Not suitable for persons under 15 years
**R18+** = Restricted to adults
**RC** = Refused Classification is commonly referred to as being "banned"

**4. ESRB:**
**EC** = Early Childhood (May be suitable for ages 3 and older).
**E** = Everyone (May be suitable for ages 6 and older).
**E10+** = Everyone 10+ (May be suitable for ages 10 and older).
**T(13+)** = Teen (May be suitable for ages 13 and older).
**M(17+)** = Mature (May be suitable for ages 17 and older).
**AO(18+)** = Adults Only (Should only be played by persons 18 years and older.
**RP** = Rating pending (Title has been submitted to the ESRB and is awaiting final rating.)

**5. ESRA:**
**3+** = 3 years old and above
**7+** = 7 years old and above
**12+** = 12 years old and above
**15+** = 15 years old and above
**18+** = 18 years old and above

**6. CERO:**
**A** = Suitable for all ages
**B(12+)** = Suitable only to 12 years and above
**C(15+)** = Suitable only to 15 years and above
**D(17+)** = Suitable only to 17 years and above
**Z(18+)** = Suitable only to 18 years and above (should not be sold or distributed to those younger than 18 years old)

**7. MDA:**
**Age Adv 16 (Age Advisory 16)** = Suitable for 16 & above
**M18** = restricted to persons 18 years and above
**NAR** = Not Allowed for All Ratings

**8. GRB:**
**All** = Titles rated ALL have content that may be suitable for all ages
**12+** = Titles rated 12+ have content that may be suitable for ages 12 and older
**15+** = Titles rated 15+ have content that may be suitable for ages 15 and older
**18+** = Titles rated 18+ have content that may be suitable for ages 18 and older

Games, it is clearly stated that instead of referring to child development theories, this guideline must be accorded to the Germany Children and Young Persons Protection Act (Stefan Piasecki, 2016).

**Table 2. Age Category and the Breakdown of Age Classification of the Existing Rating System based on its Similarity**

| NO. | AGE CATEGORY | AGE CLASSIFICATION OF EXISTING RATING SYSTEM | TOTAL |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | 0+ | PEGI(3+)<br>USK (0+)<br>ACB (G)<br>CERO(A)<br>GRB (All)<br>DJCTQ (GA) | 6 |
| 2. | 3+ | ESRB (EC)<br>ESRA(3+)<br>IARC (3+) | 3 |
| 3. | 6+ | USK (6+)<br>ESRB (E) | 2 |
| 4. | 7+ | PEGI (7+)<br>ESRA (7+)<br>IARC (7+) | 3 |
| 5. | 10+ | ESRB (10+)<br>DJCTQ (PG-10) | 2 |
| 6. | 12+ | PEGI (12+)<br>USK (12+)<br>ESRA (12+)<br>CERO (B)<br>GRB (12+)<br>DJCTQ (PG-12)<br>IARC (12+) | 7 |
| 7. | 13+ | ESRB (T) | 1 |
| 8. | 14+ | DJCTQ (PG-14) | 1 |
| 9. | 15+ | ACB (PG, M & MA 15+)<br>ESRA (15+)<br>CERO (C)<br>GRB (15+) | 6 |
| 10. | 16+ | PEGI (16+)<br>USK (16+)<br>MDA (Age Advisory 16)<br>DJCTQ (PG-16)<br>IARC (16+) | 5 |
| 11. | 17+ | ESRB (M)<br>CERO (D) | 2 |
| 12. | 18+ | PEGI (18+)<br>USK (18+)<br>ACB (R18+)<br>ESRB (AO)<br>ESRA (18+)<br>CERO (Z)<br>MDA (M18)<br>GRB (18+)<br>DJCTQ (PG-18)<br>IARC (18+) | 10 |
| 13. | BANNED | ACB (RC)<br>MDA (NAR) | 2 |
| 14. | OTHERS | ESRB (RP (Rating Pending))<br>GRB (T (Testing)) | 2 |
| | **Total** | | **52** |

Besides, the differences in the category of age classification also show that each country has their own foci in governing their digital game content for specific age group. As, for example, compared to other countries, only the United States and Brazil are found to have a rating for 10+ showing their emphasis on regulating a digital game content for younger children, whereas, Australia is found to focus more on the children with the age of 15 by having PG, M and MA 15+ rating. PG is referring to Parental Guidance in which the content is not recommended for viewing or playing by persons under 15 without guidance by parents or guardians, M rating is recommended for teenagers aged 15 years and above in which for those under 15 they can still access legally since it is an advisory category, while MA 15+ is legally restricted only for persons aged 15 years and above. These three rating highlighted more on the age of 15 as an indicator between what elements is recommended and what is not.

Most of the countries apply PG rating only on television and film. Obviously, it is easier to advise children regarding harmful elements while watching television comparing to playing digital games due to the differences of media characteristics especially in term of its interactivity and the platform used. Furthermore, most of the previous studies regarding the effects of mediated violence also suggest that playing digital games is likely to be more dangerous than other media, as player is not only interact with the game as the audience but also act as the actor (Tocci, 2008). However, in this study, it is found that Australia is the one and only country who have a PG rating in their digital game content rating system. This is probably due to Australia game content rating system is adapted from their film rating system (Felini, 2015).

According to UNICEF under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, "a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child" (United Nations General Assembly, 1989). Compared to all age categories, 18+ is found to be the one and only rating used by all of ten countries in this study. In fact, most of the countries are found to apply 18+ as the highest rating in their age classification. Thus, as similar to UNICEF, all of the countries in this study are found to categorize the persons below the age of eighteen as the age of the minor.

Instead of classifying or filtering the contents based on age suitability, two countries are found to strictly ban the game if it contains inappropriate contents that exceed their country regulation. Those countries are Australia who implemented RC or Refused Classification and Singapore who have NAR or Not Allowed for Rating. Any games that received these ratings are prohibited from being distributed or entering their countries.

In addition, there is also a rating which is not related to age category that are RP and T. RP or Rating Pending is applied by the United States for the game that is awaiting for a final ESRB rating. RP is given for a digital game that is likely to carry an ESRB

rating for advertising, marketing and promotional purposes. Whereas, T rating, which is implemented by Korea is used to rate the game contents that need to be tested before general release.

## IV CONCLUSION

Although most of age classification ratings are based on child development theories. However, based on this comparative analysis, it is found that there is no specific standard or guideline used by these countries to develop their age classification rating. This is probably due to the differences in term of their culture, religion, political aspects and country's regulation. Therefore, in order to develop an age classification rating for a model of Malaysia digital game content rating system guideline, instead of referring to child development theories as a guide, other factors that are culture, religion, political aspects and country's regulation must also take cognizance of, as a guide in developing an age classification rating that suits with our requirements.

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