

Micah Beale

Mrs. Dianne Beale

English Research Paper

24 June 2009

### A Review of the North American Rating Systems

This research paper details the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) movie ratings, the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) video game ratings, and the TV ratings (or TV Parental Guidelines). It is written to help you better understand how these systems work.

#### The MPAA

The MPAA once used a four letter system to categorize the content of movies. They were: G for General Audience, M for Mature Audience, R for Restricted Audience, and X for no one under the age of 17 will be admitted into the theater to view the film. (Valenti, Jack. "HOW IT ALL BEGAN" Web. 3 April 2009 <[http://www.mpa.org/Ratings\\_BrthofRt.asp](http://www.mpa.org/Ratings_BrthofRt.asp)>)

The G rating meant that the movie was supposed to be suitable for anyone to view. The M rating indicated that the movie was for older audiences and that parental guidance was suggested, but all age groups were still permitted to go in to view the film. (Valenti, Jack. "HOW IT ALL BEGAN" Web. 3 April 2009 <[http://www.mpa.org/Ratings\\_BrthofRt.asp](http://www.mpa.org/Ratings_BrthofRt.asp)>)

The R rating implied that the movie was aimed at adults and mature adolescents. Also, children under the age of 16 would not be permitted to enter the theater without a parent or guardian.

Later the MPAA raised the age limit to 17. (Valenti, Jack. "HOW IT ALL BEGAN" Web. 3 April 2009 <[http://www.mpa.org/Ratings\\_BrthofRt.asp](http://www.mpa.org/Ratings_BrthofRt.asp)>)

The X rating was to symbolize that no one under the age of 17, even if they were accompanied by an adult, would be allowed into the theater to view the film. Also, all ratings but the X rating in this system were trademarked. This was to allow people who were not submitting their films for a rating to apply the X rating (or another symbol/description) since they could not use the G, M, or R ratings without submission of their films. (Valenti, Jack. "HOW IT ALL BEGAN" Web. 3 April 2009 <[http://www.mpa.org/Ratings\\_BrthofRt.asp](http://www.mpa.org/Ratings_BrthofRt.asp)>)

Originally the rating system was going to contain only the G, M, and R rating. But NATO (the National Association of Theater Owners) insisted that there be an adult rating, as well, so the X rating was put into practice. (Valenti, Jack. "HOW IT ALL BEGAN" Web. 3 April 2009 <[http://www.mpa.org/Ratings\\_BrthofRt.asp](http://www.mpa.org/Ratings_BrthofRt.asp)>)

Once this rating system was in place and working properly, the ratings board found that parents believed that the M category sounded as if it were more for the adults than the R category. Thus, the MPAA decided to change this rating to GP (general audiences, parental guidance suggested). A year after this change, the category was again changed to PG (Parental Guidance suggested).

(Valenti, Jack."CHANGES IN THE RATING SYSTEM" Web. 3 April 2009

<[http://www.mpa.org/Ratings\\_hstry\\_Rvsns.asp](http://www.mpa.org/Ratings_hstry_Rvsns.asp)>)

*In July of 1984 the PG category was split into two groups - PG and PG-13. PG-13 meant a higher level of intensity than was to be found in a film rated PG. Over the past years, parents have approved of this amplifying revision in the rating system. In September of 1990 two more revisions were announced. First, the board began giving brief explanations of why a particular film received R ratings. Since, in the opinion of the Ratings Board, R rated films contain adult material, they believed it would be useful for parents to know a little more about that film's content before they allowed their children to accompany them. Sometime later the board began applying the same explanations in the PG, PG-13 and NC-17 categories as well. (Valenti,*

Jack."CHANGES IN THE RATING SYSTEM" Web. 3 April 2009

<[http://www.mpa.org/Ratings\\_hstry\\_Rvsns.asp](http://www.mpa.org/Ratings_hstry_Rvsns.asp)>)

The MPAA then changed the X category into the NC-17 Category. This was due to the misconception that the x-rated films were either pornographic in nature or extremely violent, or a mixture of the two. The MPAA found that NC-17 would be more accurately descriptive.

(Valenti, Jack."CHANGES IN THE RATING SYSTEM" Web. 3 April 2009

<[http://www.mpa.org/Ratings\\_hstry\\_Rvsns.asp](http://www.mpa.org/Ratings_hstry_Rvsns.asp)>)

These new rating adaptations were also trademarked. They are now used for movies that are not only in theaters, but also for some movies that instead go directly to DVD, VHS, and Blu-Ray.

(Valenti, Jack. "CHANGES IN THE RATING SYSTEM" Web. 3 April 2009

<[http://www.mpaa.org/Ratings\\_hstry\\_Rvsns.asp](http://www.mpaa.org/Ratings_hstry_Rvsns.asp)>)

### The ESRB

The ESRB is the group of people who rate videogames. These ratings help parents to determine what games might be appropriate for their children to play. There are currently seven ratings in use:

1. The eC rating stands for early Childhood and means that the game is for children aged three years and up. (Unknown. "Game Ratings & Descriptor Guide" Web. 7 April 2009

<[http://www.esrb.org/ratings/ratings\\_guide.jsp#rating\\_symbols](http://www.esrb.org/ratings/ratings_guide.jsp#rating_symbols)>)

2. The E rating stands for Everyone and signifies that the game is appropriate for children six years and older. (Unknown. "Game Ratings & Descriptor Guide" Web. 7 April 2009

<[http://www.esrb.org/ratings/ratings\\_guide.jsp#rating\\_symbols](http://www.esrb.org/ratings/ratings_guide.jsp#rating_symbols)>)

3. The E10+ rating stand for Everyone from ten years and older. (Unknown. "Game Ratings & Descriptor Guide" Web. 7 April 2009

<[http://www.esrb.org/ratings/ratings\\_guide.jsp#rating\\_symbols](http://www.esrb.org/ratings/ratings_guide.jsp#rating_symbols)>)

4. The T rating stands for Teen: games that are best suited for children thirteen years and older.

(Unknown. "Game Ratings & Descriptor Guide" Web. 7 April 2009

<[http://www.esrb.org/ratings/ratings\\_guide.jsp#rating\\_symbols](http://www.esrb.org/ratings/ratings_guide.jsp#rating_symbols)>)

5. The M rating stands for Mature and is recommended for only teens and adults of seventeen years and older. (Unknown. "Game Ratings & Descriptor Guide" Web. 7 April 2009

<[http://www.esrb.org/ratings/ratings\\_guide.jsp#rating\\_symbols](http://www.esrb.org/ratings/ratings_guide.jsp#rating_symbols)>)

6. The AO rating stands for Adults Only. These games are for those who are eighteen years and older. Nintendo, Sony, and Microsoft have banned such games from their systems. So it is extremely rare to actually see a game that is rated this on the market. (3Unknown. "Game Ratings & Descriptor Guide" Web. 7 April 2009

<[http://www.esrb.org/ratings/ratings\\_guide.jsp#rating\\_symbols](http://www.esrb.org/ratings/ratings_guide.jsp#rating_symbols)>)

7. The RP rating stands for Rating Pending. This means that the user should play with caution: the game is still in development and there is no current rating that has been set by the ESRB.

(Unknown. "Game Ratings & Descriptor Guide" Web. 7 April 2009

<[http://www.esrb.org/ratings/ratings\\_guide.jsp#rating\\_symbols](http://www.esrb.org/ratings/ratings_guide.jsp#rating_symbols)>)

There are also 30 content descriptors for video games, Most of these can have the word mild placed in front of them, thus broadening the many types of descriptors. (Unknown. "Game

Ratings & Descriptor Guide" Web. 7 April 2009

<[http://www.esrb.org/ratings/ratings\\_guide.jsp#rating\\_symbols](http://www.esrb.org/ratings/ratings_guide.jsp#rating_symbols)>)

Certain games that can be played online have an advisory that states that during online play the gaming experience might change due to uncontrolled circumstances (such as other players).

When a game that is rated E has online play, if the child decides to switch the game play to online mode, he or she may encounter language that would usually be found in a game rated T or M. This is because of the chat that can come from other players. (Unknown. "Game Ratings & Descriptor Guide" Web. 7 April 2009

<[http://www.esrb.org/ratings/ratings\\_guide.jsp#rating\\_symbols](http://www.esrb.org/ratings/ratings_guide.jsp#rating_symbols)>)

Online play also greatly expands the re-playability of games. For example, suppose a game usually takes eight hours to complete but has online play with cooperative. The player could complete the regular eight-hour campaign and then go online for co-op play. This would involve playing with a friend or a random person online, depending on the system and would expand the possibilities and fun during game play.

The Video Games at the ESRB get rated by a group of at least three properly trained adults who have had experience working with children. The ESRB rater's identities are secret. This is to prevent extortion and bribery from companies that want to get a specific rating for their games. These ESRB game raters are not required to have extensive ability to play video games. They are also required to play the final product of the game. They are not allowed to have ties to the

computer or video game industry for the same reason that their identities are kept secret.

(Unknown. "Frequently Asked Questions: About the Rating Process: Who decides which rating a game should get?" Web. 16 April 2009 <<http://www.esrb.org/ratings/faq.jsp#14>>)

My personal opinion is that the ESRB board members should also be required to play the game or to look through its coding to make sure that there is no hidden, inappropriate content or underestimated graphical content (like gore and blood). I believe that this would cut down on the amount of re-ratings that become necessary. However this would cause the ESRB to require more employees with salaries and would make the process more expensive.

The ESRB also rates games based on: game objectives, severity of content, occurrence of content, reward systems, and degree of player control. Some games (for the Wii) have the gamer actually act out the actions with motion controls. These should probably be rated AO but are instead rated M like their PS3 and XB360 counterparts. Sure, the Wii's graphics aren't as good, but in a game like *The Godfather* or *Man Hunt* it would make more sense for the Wii's rating to be higher than that of the XB360 and PS3 because of the motion controls. This, however, is just my opinion.

The ESRB rating process has the game developers submit a DVD for review during the final stages of the development of the game. This DVD must contain the game play, cut scenes, missions, and the game's most explicit material. The game developers are required to also answer a questionnaire-type form and list what content the game has according to ESRB content

standards. The chosen content in the game has to also be put onto the DVD. The ESRB game raters will sometimes play alpha or beta phases of the game to help determine the rating.

However, they are not required to. (Unknown. "Frequently Asked Questions: About the Rating Process: Who decides which rating a game should get?" Web. 16 April 2009

<<http://www.esrb.org/ratings/faq.jsp#14>>)

### TV Ratings

There are six TV ratings (also known as Parental Guidelines). They are TV-Y, TV-Y7, TV-G, TV-PG, TV-14, AND TV-MA and help to determine what shows are suitable for audiences to watch. (Federal Communications Commission. "The TV Parental Guidelines" Web. 16 April 2009 <<http://www.fcc.gov/vchip/>>)

TV ratings were created to act with the V-Chip. The V-Chip is inside televisions that have a screen that is 13 inches or larger. It allows the user to set it so that only TV programs within a certain rating set will be able to be viewed. For example, if you set the V-Chip to TV-14, it will not allow TV-MA to be viewed. It will allow only TV-Y, TV-Y7, TV-G, TV-PG, and TV-14 to be viewed. (Federal Communications Commission. "V-Chip: Viewing Television Responsibly" Web. 16 April 2009 <<http://www.fcc.gov/vchip/>>)

TV-Y is meant for all children to be able to watch the show. Such programs should not frighten children and are generally for children from ages two to six. (Federal Communications Commission. "The TV Parental Guidelines" Web. 16 April 2009 <<http://www.fcc.gov/vchip/>>)

TV-Y7 is meant for children ages seven and up. It may be more appropriate for children who can distinguish between reality and make-believe. The items that appear in this type of show may contain mild fantasy or comedic violence. Such shows can also have elements or themes that might frighten children under the age of seven. Programs that have more fantasy violence than the average Y7 program may contain the descriptor FV underneath the rating. This would signify that it may not be suitable for all children ages seven and up and should be viewed at the parent's discretion. (Federal Communications Commission. "The TV Parental Guidelines" Web. 16 April 2009 <<http://www.fcc.gov/vchip/>>)

TV-G is meant for general audience, much like the MPAA's G rating. Most parents will find shows that have this rating to be appropriate for their children. Although G does not signify that the program is really meant for children, they probably won't be harmed by viewing the program. These programs usually contain little to no violence, no strong language, and little or no sexual dialogue or situations. (Federal Communications Commission. "The TV Parental Guidelines" Web. 16 April 2009 <<http://www.fcc.gov/vchip/>>)

TV-PG means parental guidance is suggested and is also reminiscent of the MPAA's PG rating: the program may contain items that are not suitable for younger children. The beginning of the show may issue an audio or text warning that warns parents to be cautious about letting their children watch this. This rating can contain one or more of the following: V for moderate violence, S for some sexual situations, L for infrequent coarse language, or D for suggestive

dialogue. (Federal Communications Commission. "The TV Parental Guidelines" Web. 16 April 2009 <<http://www.fcc.gov/vchip/>>)

TV-14 means that parents should be cautious. This type of program contains content that is not designed for children under the age of 14. The beginning of the show may issue an audio or text warning that warns parents to be cautious about letting their children watch this. There are also four descriptors which may be added underneath the TV-14 symbol. These are V for intense violence, S for intense sexual situations, L for strong coarse language, and D for suggestive dialogue. (Federal Communications Commission. "The TV Parental Guidelines" Web. 16 April 2009 <<http://www.fcc.gov/vchip/>>)

TV-MA means that the program is meant for mature audiences, only. Specifically meant to be viewed by only adults, these may have content that is inappropriate for teens and children under the age of 17. This program may contain one of the following descriptors: V for graphic violence, S for explicit sexual activity, or L for crude, indecent language. (Federal Communications Commission. "The TV Parental Guidelines" Web. 16 April 2009 <<http://www.fcc.gov/vchip/>>)

TV ratings appear on the TV screen for 15 seconds before the show comes on so that you will know its rating. Best of all, such ratings work with the V-Chip to block content that you find to be unsuitable for your children. (Federal Communications Commission. "V-Chip: Viewing Television Responsibly" Web. 16 April 2009 <<http://www.fcc.gov/vchip/>>)

## Review

As you can see, there are many similarities throughout the various rating systems. There are also differences. So long as parents understand these ratings and keep track of what their children are doing, these ratings should greatly help to choose what is more appropriate to view or play. It is my hope that the research paper has helped you to better understand the review systems in North America. Thank you.

Works Cited

(MPAA references)

Valenti, Jack. "HOW IT ALL BEGAN" Web. 3 April 2009

<[http://www.mpa.org/Ratings\\_BrthofRt.asp](http://www.mpa.org/Ratings_BrthofRt.asp)>

Valenti, Jack. "CHANGES IN THE RATING SYSTEM" Web. 3 April 2009

<[http://www.mpa.org/Ratings\\_hstry\\_Rvsns.asp](http://www.mpa.org/Ratings_hstry_Rvsns.asp)>

(ESRB references)

Unknown. "Game Ratings & Descriptor Guide" Web. 7 April 2009

<[http://www.esrb.org/ratings/ratings\\_guide.jsp#rating\\_symbols](http://www.esrb.org/ratings/ratings_guide.jsp#rating_symbols)>

Unknown. "Frequently Asked Questions: About the Rating Process: Who decides which rating a game should get?" Web. 16 April 2009 <<http://www.esrb.org/ratings/faq.jsp#14>>

(TV references)

Federal Communications Commission. "V-Chip: Viewing Television Responsibly" Web. 16 April 2009 <<http://www.fcc.gov/vchip/>>

Federal Communications Commission. "The TV Parental Guidelines" Web. 16 April 2009

<<http://www.fcc.gov/vchip/>>