

# Ethical review of video game ratings philosophy essay

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To begin with, for nearly two decades there have been issues raised against violent video games. Of course the main concern is that those that play violent video games, particularly youths are more prone to acts of violence such as school shootings like the one in Columbine in the late 90's. In my short life span I have seen this concern on the news several times particularly whenever a video game made by Rockstar is recently released. The main game by Rockstar that gets the media and parents into frenzy is whenever a new Grand Theft Auto (GTA) game is released. Researchers call this frenzy a moral panic. In attempt to quell this moral panic, in 1994 man created something called the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB). Now this particular creation was made in the United States and is only used in the United States where as other countries use their own rating system. The ESRB is a non-profit organization that rates video games based on guidelines and is said to be one of the strictest rating system used to date. Now an issue could be raised with the ESRB itself because it is mostly funded by the Entertainment Software Association (ESA) which main revenue is from video games. Now the ESRB has the right to punish developers for unacceptable content and they have. Back in 2005 in the video game GTA: San Andreas there was a " hidden" sex simulator (although one had to download a code modification to get access to which is a violation of user agreement), the publisher of the game Take2 interactive (Rockstar is owned by them) lost about \$24. 5 million because of the actions taken by ESRB (Tocci, 2008). The ESRB does do the job it is assigned to do and I believe it does it well. To say that a Government regulated system would do better would not be unfounded but for now seems unnecessary. The ethical

question is should there be a Government regulated system, should the government control what games are allowed and what should be banned. According to a Game Informer article the California bill; which is summed up to be that any violent video game has to be marked with a two-inch square label on the front of the box and it will have retailers that sell these games to minors pay a \$1, 000 fine for each offense, has been successfully contested by the ESA, twice because it was believed to be unconstitutional. Now it is understandable that they are trying to pass this law to protect children but how far should the government go to do so. Would it be right for the government to virtually take away the rights of retailers and in turn hurt legitimate businesses and possibly hurt the economy? My point of view of this is that I believe that the ESRB is doing a good job at regulating the video game market. I myself am a gamer as well and I do enjoy playing video games. Now the main reason why this is such a fuss is that people believe that video games make people, children more violent. There has been research that supports this theory but there is also about the same amount of research that says the opposite, but because the media goes by the " it bleeds, it leads" mentality they go unheard. The same could be said about flying, there are hundreds to thousands of flights a day in the United States but you only hear about a plane crash once in a while that was accidental. Now I have been playing video games since the first Nintendo, I have played some non-violent games and since the first Sony Playstation came out, lots of violent ones. Now considering my long past with video games and since my pre-teen age, lots of violent video games, I could be a rare exception but if the theories of increased violence are correct and you saw my video game

library it is a wonder that I haven't killed anyone. It is true that studies have shifted their focus from violence to aggression but the same still holds true for me. Back to point at hand the ESRB does the job it has been given and the job does not stop at just rating, it goes as far as working with retailers to enforce the standards that they have set and also educate parents on the rating system they have in place. Now in every store that sells video games up until I reached the age of 22 have I been asked to present an ID for me to purchase a rated ' M' video game, so I know for sure that most stores do uphold the standards that the ESRB has put in place. I feel that as long as these standards are kept and everyone does what they are supposed to do correctly a government system is not necessary. Now my point of view on this subject is a little biased and this is focused mostly on the way the ESRB works and if it is ethical and would a government system based off of the California bill would be ethical as well. To start off, Kant's categorical imperative would be a good way to look at both. First with the ESRB; the ESRB starts off with having their full-time raters do weeks of training to interpret the gameplay. These raters will " watch videos, read questionnaires and review scripts or lyric sheets provided by publishers... Based on this information, three or more raters will review a game and discuss what the rating should be... Upon determining a game's rating, the ESRB notifies the publishers of its decision." (Tocci, 2008) The ESRB does not stop there; the ESRB also has the cooperation of manufacturers and retailers which only will sell ESRB rated games and have agreed to ask for ID when it comes to selling an ' M' rated game. Also the major console manufacturers have also agreed to have only ESRB rated games work on their systems. Now to look at

this using the Categorical Imperative, since the publishers send them their games and any hidden content that may be inside of them it is safe to assume that they are working with each other. For the most part if a publisher gets a rating that they are not pleased with they have the ability to appeal but there have been no reports of any publisher using the appeal process. This supports that the two groups work together and not treat each other as a means to an end but each side treats each other as an end. The same can be said on the retail and manufacture side, retailers have agreed to enforce what the ESRB has put into place. Also some major retailers have decided not to sell the rare 'AO' rated games, which to date less than 30 games released have had that rating on them. Albeit the game Manhunt 2 did originally have the 'AO' rating, Take2 modified it so it could get an 'M' rating. Also since manufacturers have agreed to only allow ESRB rated games to work on their systems, things considered very harmful to minors have been for the most part eliminated. Since retailers and manufacturers have agreed to work with the ESRB Kant would say that this is an ethical system since neither side is using each other as a means to an end. Now to see how the California bill would work based off of a Game Informer article. Now this will just be an expansion of what was summed up earlier. " The California bill eschews the ESRB rating system and demands a separate set of descriptors be applied." The word eschews means: To avoid or shun; according to The American Heritage Dictionary. The article goes on to say that it describes a violent game. " The range of options available to a player that include killing, maiming, dismembering, or sexually assaulting an image of a human being." This was a quote in the article that was quoted from the

actual bill. The bill also describes each word that was quoted and adds to the description that includes characters that have substantially human characteristics. Further on the writer quotes another piece of the bill. " A reasonable person, considering the game as a whole, would find it appeals to a deviant or morbid interest of minors... it is patently offensive to prevailing standards in the community as to what is suitable for minors... or it causes the game, as a whole, to lack serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value for minors." The article goes on to say that the bill only applies to retail games not downloads. Is it ethical to only target the retail part of the industry; are the law makers even aware of this possibility? Do those that made this law even up-to-date with video games today? Those questions will have to be answered some other time as they are not the focus of this paper. Now since California isn't the only state that supports this kind of law; and this particular law will only apply to California, will the other states that support this have to adopt their own law thus putting strain on the industry to make sure all games apply to all of the laws of each state? Now according to Kant's Categorical Imperative, although the intention is good, this law is not working with the industry but it is forcing itself onto the industry. Since not all video games are made in America; Ubisoft for example is a Canadian based company, this law might interfere with the Canadian laws and may cause hurt to the company revenue and possibly hurt the American economy because it would be better off not to distribute their games in the United States. From the retailer's point of view, since they do not want to get into any trouble and pay fines, some retailers would not even carry some games for fear of getting in trouble. This dilemma could cause pain to the economy

and is forcing retailers to possibly lose their revenue. Since the California bill is forcing itself onto the producers of video games and retailers, this would not be an ethical solution where as the system the ESRB implements, though not perfect is ethical according to Kant's Categorical Imperative. Is there any kind of duty or moral law that goes along with this ethical dilemma? If there was a clear-cut answer then it wouldn't be an ethical dilemma. Although people will argue about who has that duty of enforcing that moral law; if there is one, either the game industry or the government or the very people that buy the games one of those must have that duty to enforce the moral law if one did exist. The moral law here is arguable and would take some time to get into so it will be avoided. The focus will be on what the duty is and who will have to enforce that duty. The duty here is who is responsible for regulating the industry. Is it supposed to be the government? Is it the industry itself that should be self regulating? Or is it us, the consumers, are we the ones responsible for what is put out there? I feel that the answer is both the industry and us, the consumers. Us; the consumers have demands, demands that the industry responds to in hopes of making a profit. Now we are responsible for our own demands but the industry is responsible for blindly following our demands. Now the industry does not follow our demands blindly otherwise it would have been long gone. The industry responds to what the consumers want and in most cases improves or adds to it, which is the reason why the technology is advancing fast and that online multiplayer is becoming more of the focus in video games today. Now since the consumers demand things it is up to the industry to make the games suitable to the majority of those demanding it. If the industry makes a game

that grosses out the consumers, then the industry may not make a profit off of it. Also if the game is graphic then there will be an outcry from those that are none consumers. To prevent the negative attention the industry must self-regulate and make a game that keeps the consumers happy. On the consumer side of things if a parent blindly buys whatever little Danny wants and then later sees that the game they just got for little Danny is graphic and horrid in their eyes, they might learn to regulate what games little Danny gets. It is up to the consumers or their parents to determine what is acceptable; when such regulation happens the industry will respond to that as well. Utilitarianism, what does that mean? Utilitarianism is an ethical theory based on the Principle of Utility or Greatest Happiness Principle. According to Ethics for the Information Age it is; " An action is right (or wrong) to the extent that it increases (or decreases) the total happiness of the affected parties. In Utilitarianism one could use the Principle or Utility/Greatest Happiness Principle as a way to measure moral actions based on how much happiness is caused. Act Utilitarianism is the same as Utilitarianism except that it is based on the actions done and the total amount of happiness is brought by it. Back to the rating system from the Act Utilitarianism point of view which ever system would make the most people happy. Right now it seems like only a few people are unhappy or dissatisfied with the ESRB system. Since the game industry is working with the ESRB as well as retailers and game console manufacturers it is producing a large amount of happiness. The consumers are happy with getting what they want for the most part and the industry is happy because they are making money from it. Also retailers are happy because they are the middle-man in all of



this and they make money also. Now based off of what was in the Game Informer article the California bill will not cause as much happiness. The only ones that will be truly happy are the ones for the California bill. Now some statistics to show you the balance of this; a few law-makers in a total of twelve states support this while over four million consumers bought Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare 2; which is a first-person shooter that is ' M' rated, in the first week of it's release(Miller, 2010). Stack those numbers together and you will see how many people would be unhappy with this decision should the bill pass and all states decide to follow suit. If sales are restricted and retailers are afraid to get fined and decide against carrying those games there will be more harm than benefit. So in the view of Act Utilitarianism the ESRB system is the most ethical one. Rule Utilitarianism is the same as Act Utilitarianism except Rule Utilitarianism focuses on the moral rules that if they were followed by everyone it would lead to an increase to total happiness. Now earlier it was said that there would be a great debate over what the moral rule would be here but for the sake of arguing it will be said that the moral rule will be that the government says what will be able to be sold and what is allowed to be made. This may sound a little far-fetched but it is what the California bill is ultimately pushing. Let's say that they industry came up with an amazing game that is wonderful in plot, characters, the art and a high level of creativity but unfortunately the main thing that holds all of those things in place is extreme violence and corrupt politicians that resemble current people in office. Since the government may feel threatened about this they will restrict it and the people and the industry will lose out and the industry may feel like their first amendment rights are being

violated. On the flip side the corrupt politicians will breathe easier because it will be kept quiet. It will not stop at video games either, since it is a moral rule it could be applied to the news. There would be lots of censorship all over because the corrupt politicians don't want the world to know what they really are like, and the basis of the United States will crumble causing the country to spiral into chaos which would lead to more harm than good. Under Rule Utilitarianism this is morally wrong and should not be applied. Now the current system in place by the ESRB says the moral rule is following the guidelines to rate the games. If those guidelines are followed and ID is checked for every 'M' rated game and a company doesn't try to hoodwink the ESRB, the consumers will get what they want, the industry will be happy because they are making money that the consumers are willing to give in exchange for good quality games. So according to Rule Utilitarianism this is a more desirable outcome compared to the previous moral rule which may have been slightly exaggerated. Rule Utilitarianism says this is moral. Even though the aim for the California bill is high and I do applaud the fact that they are trying to protect the people from violence it just is not good like the ESRB system which does work and they do their job that they are given even though they are funded by the ESA. The bill is more focused on research that says that the violent video games may increase the risk of violence in the youth; there is research that states the opposite. I have read two such articles before writing this paper even though I have made no reference to them because they do not weigh in on the ethical issue of the rating system. To conclude this paper it is safe to say that the current rating system for video games is ethical according to Kant's Categorical Imperative, Act

Utilitarianism and Rule Utilitarianism. Since the current system does not force itself onto the industry the Categorical Imperative will say that it is ethical and right now it seems to make the most sense instead of what the California bill is trying to achieve although it has good intentions. The Utilitarian approaches agree with the ESRB system being the more ethical of the two choices.