Children's Charities' Coalition on Internet Safety

Video Games Classification – a consultation

Our response to your consultation is set out below.

In the course of preparing our response we met with the BBFC and with ELSPA, ISFE and the Video Standards Council to discuss their different standpoints in relation to the matters raised in the consultation document.

It is clear that gaming is enormously popular among children and young people. It is also clear that gaming has real, positive potential for children but it can also expose them to risk. We agree with the premise of the Byron report that children should be playing games that are age appropriate and that parents and carers should be able to feel confident about making an informed and realistic assessment of the risks that their children may face through gaming.

Moving to the substantive points raised in the consultation document, it is clear that there is a widespread consensus about the desirability of bringing video games which are currently rated 12+ within the scope of statutory regulation. This is a view we endorse[1].

There is also a widespread consensus that the future of video games lies increasingly in the online environment. Even games which continue to be sold off the shelf, are delivered through the post in boxes, or come preloaded on machines, will also have an online component to them, perhaps a very substantial online component. Moving into this world of online gaming will allow much richer gaming experiences but it will also bring with it new levels of complexity and challenges. It will put knowledge and understanding of the online world at an absolute premium in whatever organizational arrangements finally emerge to take responsibility for regulating this space.

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[1] And we also note with approval the position recommended by the French Internet Forum, reported at page 201 of the Byron Report, where any game which allowed a chat function should always attract a minimum rating of 12+.

At paragraph 7.25 of her report Dr Byron comments

> "Very early on in my Review, it became clear that having a dual classification system and two sets of symbols often made things confusing for the consumer, especially for parents and children."

It seems to us that this view is also widely shared within the video games industry. What to do about it is at the heart of what needs to be resolved following this consultation.

Our view is that a single system which works across all video games is the preferred option. For that reason we do not support Option 1 (a hybrid classification system) as it is set out in the document. Neither do we support Option 4, the status quo.

However, we recognise that because there are currently two organizations operating in this area, the BBFC and PEGI, in order to achieve our desired outcome, of having a single system with a single set of symbols and related promotional material, one or other of these organizations must be asked to withdraw, or alternatively a way must be found to join their efforts into a single system.

In our discussions with PEGI much weight was attached to the "pan-European" nature of their existing system and how it was important, for example, that if a Polish adult were playing a particular game with someone from the UK, both could be confident that their opponent was, like them, an adult. By contrast it was suggested that in the absence of a pan-European system, or where different rating systems are being used, it might be possible for a 12 year old from the UK to end up playing against a 20 year old from Poland, where perhaps both might mistakenly believe that they were playing against someone closer to their own age

We do not claim to have carried out a comprehensive survey of every country in the world to see how they handle the challenge of rating video games, but a brief look did manage to turn up several different working systems. In addition to PEGI we found different games rating systems in the USA and Canada, Germany, Australia, Japan, New Zealand, Brazil and South Korea. The UK, of course, has the dual system and we understand there also seems to be a new system – TIGRS – for independent developers.

The fact that Germany is not now, and never has been, a member of PEGI does rather detract from the idea that PEGI is truly pan-European, although we are given to understand that within the online space talks are taking place to bring the Germans within the PEGI umbrella. Also we cannot help but observe that, at least where there is a chat or language dimension to the game play, UK children are far more likely to engage with players in other English-speaking countries and all of the big ones appear not to use PEGI. This is not to deny that UK children will also engage with other game players from non-English speaking countries (we have no evidence on this point either

way) but our assumption is that the English-speaking countries are more likely to provide the majority of opponents or fellow game players for UK children.

Within and around PEGI there is a huge amount of knowledge and expertise in the field of online gaming. Gaming is their core business. Moreover, in recent discussions with PEGI they were most emphatic that they saw an important part of their mission as being to use their 29-country membership base as a jumping off point for achieving a high degree of synchronisation with the other games rating systems being used in other parts of the world. This is a substantial point in PEGI's favour and should PEGI end up being entrusted with this work we would be very keen to see this being built into their work programme and for them to be held accountable for achieving it. There is no doubt that, particularly as games shift on to the internet, the more extensive or near global the ratings system is the better it is from a child protection perspective. In that context we think there is a real possibility that if, in effect, the UK were to withdraw from the PEGI system, it could deal a fatal blow to PEGI and we would, thereby, be jeopardising a child protection system and that is not a prospect we relish.

There is no denying that within and around PEGI there is a huge amount of knowledge and expertise in the field of online gaming. That is their core business. Yet at the same time it is also true that the BBFC has considerable experience in the space but, in addition, the BBFC has the substantial additional advantage of owning a better understood branding. There is undoubtedly still progress to be made to raise awareness of games rating systems and to help UK parents to understand the risks of gaming but we do consider that at the current time there is greater awareness and understanding of the BBFC brand and symbols than there is of the PEGI symbols. Another advantage that the BBFC have is that they look at the context of the sex or violence that appears in each game and make an impressively detailed and in depth assessment of each game.

Whichever organization ends up running the new, single system which we think is needed, it would be important for undertakings to be obtained which commit the sole supplier to high levels of investment in marketing.

Towards the end of the consultation process PEGI approached CHIS to advise us of a number of important decisions which they have recently taken: these include constituting PEGI as a separate organization with an independent Board and an independent Chairman to oversee the operation of the PEGI system and guarantee its integrity. They also indicated that the penalties for non-compliance were to be enhanced and that all games would be reviewed and classified prior to their release. In addition PEGI appears to be inclined to develop an entirely new system for classifying and "kitemarking" a set of online games which currently, in effect, have no form of classification at all. These are not insignificant developments which could easily be picked up and entrenched in any wider legislative or regulatory framework which might emerge from the current review.

Nonetheless we would even now express the hope that PEGI and the BBFC could find a way to develop a single games rating system which works for all games and for all British consumers, especially children. Hopefully, with sufficient ingenuity and negotiating skill, such a system could remain faithful to and consistent with a pan European or broader international system. The advantages of having such a wider system are very clear and they are highly desirable. This would amount to a co-regulatory approach. Either way it would and must mean, in the end, a single set of symbols and language appearing on games boxes and web sites, linked to a single set of educational and outreach programmes designed to promote the relevant safety messages to parents and children alike.

For further information please contact John Carr, (07961 367960) or john.carr49@btinternet.com