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# **Morality and Religion as factors in Age Rating Computer and Video Games: ESRA, the Iranian Games Age Rating System**

Stefan Piasecki, Setareh Malekpour

## **Abstract**

ESRA, the Entertainment Software Rating Association, is the name of Iran's computer games age rating system introduced in 2008 by its video game association IRCG. This new rating system is based on what this country deems as social, psychological and religious norms and values and is the only games age rating system in the Middle East. It is now by far the most developed age rating system in the Muslim world that is based on the Islamic laws.

But based on what criteria is this system working – compared with other systems like USK or IARC? What procedure games go through before being classified and labeled? What have been the effects of the Islamic rules on the rating of the video games? What are the merits and demerits of this relatively new system?

## **Keywords**

Video Games, Religion, Islam, Age Rating, IARC, ESRA, USK, Youth Protection

## **1 Introduction**

There are ongoing controversies over whether the content of video games can affect or change the behavior of the players or not. Each year attempts are made to clarify and scientifically prove the effect of video games. Scientific researches are carried out and hypotheses are formed and yet there is no uniform opinion regarding this subject (Piasecki 2017, pp. 335), as a random selection of book titles easily shows, not to mention the multitude of studies (for a review of research on computer games see Tobias / Fletcher / Yun Dai / Wind 2011, pp. 183). This could be partly due to the fact that video games haven't been around long enough for researchers to carry long-term studies spanning years or even decades observing individuals who played games in different stages of their

lives (for such an attempt on television, reviewing individual lives over a period of 30 years see Robertson / Mcanally / Hancox 2013) and also due to the fact that the video game industry is rapidly developing and introducing not only advancements in graphics but also in the range of contents the games cover and the complexity of their plots, giving rise to new areas of study for those eager to find a definite answer to end the video game controversies.

Nevertheless appearance of harmful contents in video games nowadays, is inevitable. But what “harmful” means differs nation to nation and varies based on who is playing the game. While the use of alcohol and drugs or the display of offensive sex scenes would be considered harmful in Islamic countries, in Germany the same goes for swastikas and other Nazi symbols, which then again would not pose any problem in most other parts of the world. Harmful content becomes a significant topic when games are played by children, teenagers and young people who are highly susceptible to media and need protection for a proper development of their character into adulthood:

We may be asking the wrong questions and making the wrong assumptions. For example, instead of looking for a simple, direct relationship between video game violence and violent behavior in all children, we should be asking how we might identify those children who are at greatest risk for being influenced by these games. (Kutner / Olson 2008, p. 18)

Media youth protection and age rating systems try to strike a balance between suitable and non-suitable content that might impose damage in juveniles and children. Although some topics are regarded harmful in almost all systems (such as sexual harassment or intense violence) others vary nation to nation based on their unique norms and cultural, religious and social values. This is where youth protection comes into action designing schemes to facilitate youth’s development. This duty falls on different departments and organizations in different countries but its existence in any nation is undeniable and recognized by authorities worldwide, even though large parts of the world like the middle-east and the African countries are still not covered with a proper rating system. One of the duties of any designated organization is youth protection against harmful content of video games which is mainly achieved by age rating them, thus restricting access to certain age groups.

Age rating of video games protects the sensitive age groups against what is deemed ‘harmful’ content. Interestingly enough, in every culture of the world these efforts aim at children and juveniles, never at adults – with the exception of the Iranian system that, in its very first installment (in 2008), also considered up to 25 year olds.

This article will lay out key figures of the Iranian games market and describe the rules and regulations of the rating system of Iran’s Entertainment Software Rating Association (ESRA), founded in 2008. These will be put into perspective with Germany’s USK (“Unterhaltungssoftware Selbstkontrolle”, established in 1994) and the recently established international IARC system

(International Age Rating Coalition, 2013), which is especially suitable for online content. ESRA considered other models such as USK's for the development of theirs (ESRA Booklet, p.1).

Little (international) literature exists so far about ESRA and sparse information is to be found online. Therefore, to conduct a proper research, personal meetings were made with representatives of ESRA itself, the Iranian games association IRCG, and the German system USK. Such meetings took place on July, 26th 2016 in Tehran, alongside Gamescom in Cologne on August, 18th 2016 and in Berlin at USK on August, 31st 2016. ESRA and USK helped by providing documents and giving help and advice. Additional questions were discussed with Reza Ahmadi the General Manager of Esra, Mehrdad Ashtiani the Head of International Affairs at IRCG and Felix Falk the General Manager of USK. Background material was provided by the aforementioned and also Christine Schulz and Marek Brunner at USK as well as Seyyed Mohamed Ali Seyyed Hosseini of DIREC, IRCGs Digital Games Research Center and Maryam Ahmadi of IRCG.

### 1.1 The Iranian Scope

Iran's ESRA mentions the following as the benefits of designing a national age rating system in their basic rating guidelines that resulted from their initial research in the fields of psychology, religion and sociology. These guidelines come in 9 volumes (see below):

1. Family's concern will be alleviated in finding the suitable game for their children
2. The regulatory and administrative organizations will be able to identify the unlabeled games and carry out the subsequent penalties
3. The publishers and distributors will be aware of the negative effects of harmful games, therefore they will stop to produce and distribute them
4. The national producers will be able to produce and target games for certain age groups, enabling them to make up for the scarcity of games for certain age groups in the market
5. Facilitating and developing the distribution of national games in other countries with similar cultures, norms and values (ESRA Guidelines, Vol 1, p. 99).

In their second volume they also mention that after having studied and compared different existing age rating systems in the world such as ESRB, USK, PEGI and CERO they realized that the biggest problem of using these systems is the cultural difference between Iran and other countries. Even though in comparison with other systems CERO's oriental culture is closer to Iran, still the religious

difference and the different norms make CERO an inappropriate rating system for this country (ESRA Guidelines, Vol 2, p. 104).

This concern of Iran led to the development of a system in line with the social and religious norms of this country while considering what could be psychologically, socially or religiously detrimental to the development of young persons.

In their aforementioned research, condensed in 9 volumes of rules and regulations, ESRA has reviewed the Islamic thoughts and has considered its viewpoint just as equally as it has that of the psychology and sociology. Indeed what makes ESRA unique is its regard for the Islamic viewpoint in rating of the games. Such a system could and can be used by other Islamic countries as well.

This concern about the unique norms and values isn't confined to Iran only. Germany's USK too follows a strict and nationally developed system, stemming from the much older traditions of movie and television age rating. Following the provisions of the law relating to the protection of young persons plus the General Policy Statement of USK (2011), the Guidance Criteria and other additional criteria, USK classifies games based on their specific designed age groups.

## **2 The Iranian Games Market**

Video games are not only a cultural phenomenon; they also form a dominant market that is gaining a rapidly growing share amongst leisure industries. Annual revenue estimates of computer and video games and peripherals have reached a total of 270 million US\$ in 2016 for Iran (Newzoo, April 2016) after it being 185 million US\$ in 2015, letting the country climb up the ladder from ranking position no. 38 to 32 recently in Newzoo's "Top 100 Country by Game Revenue" list.

For comparison, Germany currently ranks no. 5 with total estimated revenue of 4 billion US\$. The uplift of the UN sanctions on Iran in January 2016 cannot explain the solid development of Iran's games market alone. More convincing is the fact that Iran has a rapidly growing population of about 80 million people with 49 million being under 35 years of age (CIA 2015).

Both the Iranian educational system and economic development appear stable compared to many other countries in the region. Despite political conflicts and military activity in certain regions, Iran has not had to directly face a war in more than 25 years. Despite the unemployment rates being high (11,7%, World bank Overview on Iran, April 2016), especially those of Iranians under 29 years of age (21.9% men / 40.1% women, according to World bank, Iran Economic Monitor, March 2016, 12), and a social system that according to western standards appears underdeveloped, at first glance these figures do not differ much from youth unemployment rates of

25% and higher in Portugal (32%), Spain (48,3%) or Greece (49,8%) (all figures: Eurostat), not to mention the vast amount of “hidden unemployment” in Germany itself, barely kept under the surface of refined statistical tricks.

Iranians use the internet (IRCG Facts Book 2016, 4), about 91% of them own mobile phones and of these, 38% use smartphones capable of performing modern games (ibid., 5). This renders numbers plausible that 23 million Iranians can be seen as gamers being 21 years old in average. 37% of the Iranian gamers are female (ibid., pp. 7). In fact according to a study conducted in 2015 by Iran’s Digital Games Research Center DIREC (2016), a spin-off company of Iran Computer Games Foundation IRCG, there is an average of 1 gamer in each household (DIREC 2015, 5).

Just as in other countries, gamers are young. 29% count as “young” and 33% as “teen” (ibid., 7). 25% even are marked as “child” (DIREC 2016, 4).

Such numbers, again put into relation with Iran’s relatively young population, demonstrate the significance of games as a means of leisure activity in this country. Iran is the only Islamic country that has established such a system that today also serves as a model for other countries like Malaysia which has not yet introduced such a system but uses ESRA’s rating when needed, according to ESRA president Reza Ahmadi (interview July 26th IRCG HQ).

Unlike for example USK, ESRA was not able to find orientation in other existing national age rating systems. Germany’s USK was able to benefit from experiences of German movie and television age rating boards and decisions (FSK and FSF). There is, however, no such system for motion imagery in Iran.

Cultural and societal issues in Iran are often connected to activities of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (وزارت فرهنگ و ارشاد اسلامی). Here new movie scripts for example have to be submitted for verification and acceptance. The Iran Computer & Video Games Foundation created a new system unlike any other age rating tradition in Iran. Of course, also just like in other countries, still game players and parents alike criticize ESRA for the inappropriateness of their decisions: parents find ratings too weak, players too harsh (interview August 18th Gamescom). This makes it plausible that any age rating model be based on concrete guidelines.

Meanwhile, the Iranian government drafted a National Plan for Computer Games in Iran to substantially develop this young industry and to support jobs and innovative products alike giving the medium and the industry itself a meaning of national relevance (IRCG Facts Book 2016, 11).

But based on what criteria is ESRA working? What procedure games go through before finally being authorized and labelled? What have been the effects of the Islamic rules on the rating of the video games? What are the merits and demerits of this relatively new system?



### 3 Age Rating – Basic Information on established systems

One of the most significant factors affecting the social and psychological development of the 21<sup>st</sup> century's individual, especially the youth, is the audio-visual media. Each year massive volumes of games and leisure entertainment products enter the market providing an unlimited number of choices for the target audience. The role of age rating systems came to attention when parents realized that through these media their children were exposed to material they had previously so attentively tried to keep their children away from. For more than 20 years games age rating was more or less dominated by national classifications in various countries. Discourses about the ban of single games dominated the 1980s until in the early 1990s national age rating systems such as USK in Germany (1994) and ELSPA in England (1994, later PEGI) were established. A more recent example of such establishments would be IARC (2013), the latest attempt to establish global standards for computer and video games age rating systems that is also suitable for Apps which are sold worldwide and could hardly be rated by local / national standards alone. Nations in the west came up with organizations and systems therefore, to assess the content of each production of this media to classify or rate them based on their suitability for the audience. PEGI, USK and IARC were brainchildren of western cultures, while little development was seen in the Muslim world – or so it seems.

#### 3.1 USK

##### 3.1.1 *Legal background*

Germany consists of 16 federal states. Each of these states bears its own legislative system with a full set of laws. Following a principle of subsidiarity, federal states hold a responsibility for certain tasks. Foreign policy or defense for example, are matters concerning all of the single states and are therefore organized by the federal republic as a whole while education, security (police) and also in this case the Protection of Young Persons as long as any forms of media are concerned, are a matter of each federal state alone (JMStV 2003). This system is able to respect certain regional conventions, tastes, cultural differences and traditions, but to prevent a multitude of parallel legal states when issues are addressed that reach beyond the control of each federal state a common authority is needed to both care for the interests of the single federal states and also to secure a common legislative system.

Art. 5 of the German Constitution guarantees the freedom of speech and the ban of censorship, which in practice means that no content can be controlled or banned before it was published. The German system of self- and co-regulation is legally based on the Jugendschutzgesetz (JuSchG – Protection of Young Persons Act 2016) and applies to movies and games that are sold on

physical media (see also Hilgert / Sümmerrmann 2015, 544). Movies and games distributed online (“Telemedien”) are regulated by the Jugendmedienstaatsvertrag (JMStV – Interstate Treaty on the Protection of Minors in the Media; *ibid.*), a treaty between the single federal states. With this treaty a regulated self-regulation is maintained within a legal framework. A distinction is being made between online and offline media. Cinema, DVDs or videos etc. as well as computer games physically sold in shops are considered to be offline media, while television and online content is understood as online media. While offline media is handled by the “Jugendschutzgesetz”, online media is regulated in accordance with the “Jugendmedienstaatsvertrag”. But, as Hilgert and Sümmerrmann argue, §12 JMStV only applies to content available online that is “comparable” to content available offline – for example downloadable versions of games that can physically be bought in shops (*ibid.*). Nevertheless platforms that offer media content online still have the responsibility to protect their customers of content that may be harmful.

The term “regulated self-regulation” indicates that, although minors are protected by self-regulation organized by an institution that takes fees from games publishers, there still is another level of regulation implied, in the case of offline games the “Vertreter der Obersten Landesjugendschutzbehörden” (Supreme Youth Protection Authorities of the Federal States) and for online content the “Kommission für Jugendmedienschutz” (KJM – Commission for the Protection of Minors in the Media). KJM and Supremes Authorities of the federal state may intervene against decisions if necessary.

Any decision regarding offline content can be either appealed against by members of the rating commission, the submitting companies or each federal state through the Highest Authorities.

### **3.1.2 USK's organizational structure**

The structure of USK is defined and explained best in Art. 1 (1) of USKs General Policy Statement (2011 – USK GPS from now on): German games industry acts in a self-regulatory manner in conducting a voluntary classification of computer and video games, this organization takes place at USK. Age categorization and also the age rating symbols are maintained in the responsibility of the Supreme Youth Protection Authorities of the Federal States. USK itself prepares and organizes the classification process and advises providers of content and also acts as a voice in the opinion forming process in respect of computer games and the German Youth Media Protection (Art. 2 (4) USK GPS). USK as the representative of the German games industry and the Permanent Representatives of the Supreme Youth Protection Authorities of the Federal States act as the regulated self-regulatory system laid out above.

The decision making Classification Committee consists of members with a special knowledge, good judgement and experiences in dealing with children and young people, developmental psychology and media effects research (Art. 2 (2) USK GPS).

### *3.1.2.1 Hierarchies and structure of USK*

German games age rating at USK is maintained by different groups of experts who play and judge games, prepare material for decisions regarding an age rating classification and also pursue the classification itself.

#### Advisory Council:

USK's advisory council, according to Art. 3 (1) USK GPS, appoints youth protection experts and game testers and also members of Appeals and Appellate Committees. It also is responsible for "specialist advice to the USK in respect of the socio-political acceptance and transparency of its activities" (Art. 3 (1) 7. USK GPS). Seats in the Council are, as of Art. 3 (2) USK GPS, reserved for two representatives of the computer games industry, two representatives of the Supreme Youth Protection Authorities of the Federal States, one Representative of the Supreme Federal Youth Protection Authorities, two representatives of independent providers of children's and young people's social services, a representative of the Department for Media Harmful to Young Persons, two representatives of churches and other religious communities and last but not least, one media education representative, a youth protection expert representative, a legal expert and one representative of the Commission for the Protection of Minors in the Media (KJM).

The members of this Advisory Council are appointed by the Supreme Youth Protection Authorities of the Federal States (Art 3. (3) USK GPS).

#### Permanent Representatives:

Computer games associations as organized within the USK plus the Supreme Youth Protection Authorities of the Federal States appoint Permanent Representatives of the Supreme Youth Protection Authorities. These are involved "*in all issues relating to youth protection and for the purpose of classification and age rating of image media*" (Art. 4 USK GPS).

#### Youth protection experts:

Advisory Council appoints Youth Protection Experts for the work in the Classification Committee. The nomination is made by both the members of USK and the Supreme Youth Protection

Authorities of the Federal States. According to Art. 5 (3) USK GPS, experts “*should be experienced in dealing with children and young people and should have comprehensive media competence*”, they must be capable of giving age recommendations “*on the basis of specialist knowledge and good judgement*” (ibid.). They must not be employed by any commercial company within the games industry.

#### Game testers:

Game testers are being proposed to the Advisory Council by the management of the USK according to Art. 6 (2) USK GPS. Their job is to assess the games and present them to the classification committee and to extract and “*present all contents relevant to youth protection without themselves making an evaluation*” (Art. 6 (1) USK GPS).

The USK teaches its testers the correct way to present a game. This requires special skills, a precise knowledge of the global games culture, of the development of digital technology, of games production and of child protection. For this reason, USK games testers are amongst the best qualified experts within this branch in Germany. They operate in a similar manner to expert witnesses in court and remain available to the Committee until such time as members are able to arrive at a justified decision. Testers are provided with the training they need to fulfil this demanding task during a probationary period at the USK before being appointed by the Advisory Council. (USK Classification Procedure)

What is the exact role of a game tester in Germany’s games age rating procedures?

The game tester is a vital part of the German Age System. We got 3 female and 5 male testers between 19 and 33 years old playing through and presenting over 500 games per year – all the titles from the normal rating procedure and some games for AddOn- procedures. (USK by Email, Sept. 14th 2016)

#### Classification Committees:

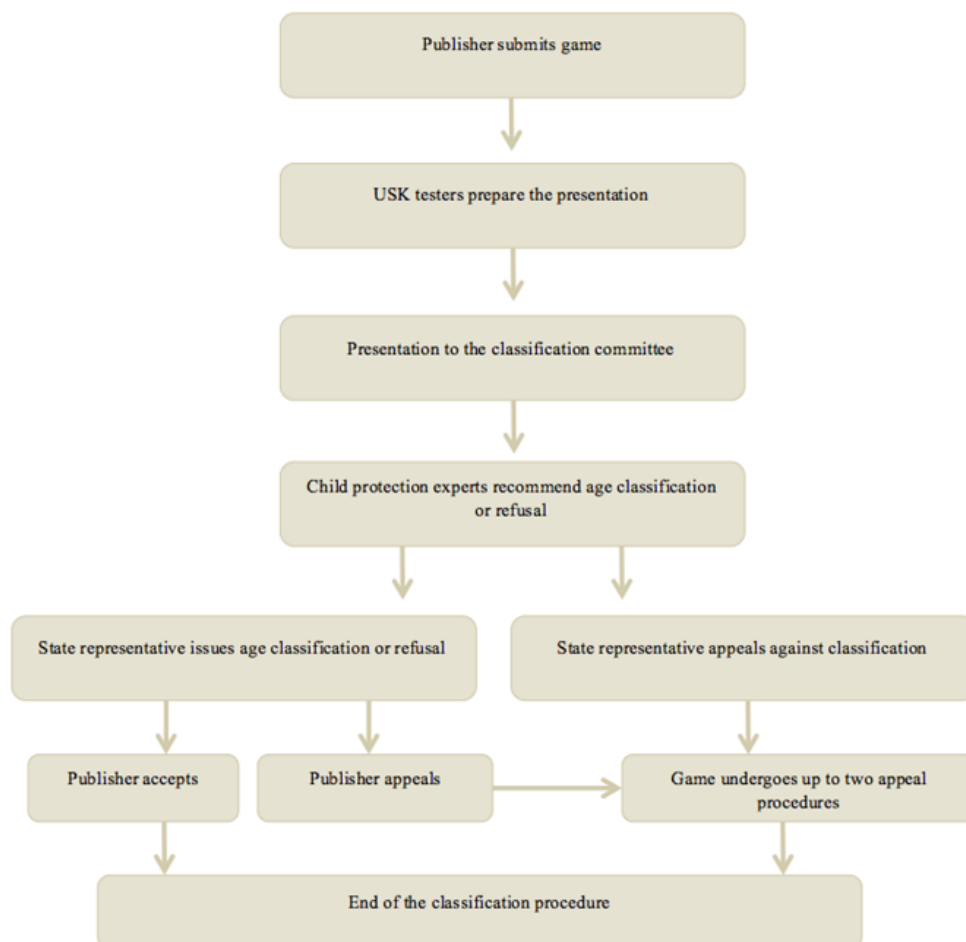
Age rating decisions are made by the Classification Committee at USK which consists of four youth protection experts and the Permanent Representative, chairing the committee. It is using material prepared by the game testers. In case the rating decision is met by an appeal, a new commission with four youth protection experts who did not previously vote in the standard procedure gathers to formulate a new decision. The Permanent Representative has, although being present, no voting rights.

In case of an appeal procedure (as further defined in Art. 14 USK GPS), according to Art. 7 (4) USK GPS, a “second appeal” with an extended Classification Committee is formed to make a decision, consisting of a chairperson of the Appellate Committee, “four members appointed by the Supreme Youth Protection Authorities of the Federal States” (Art. 7 (4) 2. USK GPS) and two youth protection experts formerly not having been involved with the case. The chairperson is appointed by the Advisory Council and “may not have been involved in the examination case thus far” (ibid.).

**3.1.3 Games rating at USK: classification procedure**

At the root of the rating process stands the idea that impairments of children and young persons must be prevented. According to Art. 19 (2) 1. USK GPS, such impairments are “understood to refer to inhibitions, disturbances or damage”. The overall effect of a game is to be considered here. It must not overexcite imagination or inhibit character or moral (and religious) and mental development or cause disorientation in social ethical terms (Art. 19 (2) 3. USK GPS).

Figure 1:



Classification procedure at USK

Rating a game starts with submission of the game with the proper documentation to USK. The process is subject to charges (Art. 10 USK GPS). The non-public (and confidential (Art. 12 USK GPS) examination procedure “comprises presentation, consultation and adoption of a resolution (Art. 10 (3)). A representative of USK announces all data and information and circumstances necessary for the classification, a game tester shows the game or content of the game.

They play through the game, try to grab as many side missions as they can and then write an excerpt about the game (with points like Storyline, characters, gameplay, Audio, Video, Atmosphere, Youth protection). They then choose which parts of the game they are going to present live, so while preparing the presentation they have to think about a nutshell-level – the perfect chapter(level/episode where every gaming aspect is seen and can be noticed by the experts.

The game presentation will start with the experts reading the tester paper, then the tester will start with the tutorial, intro, first level; they insist on the testers that they play lows and searching, pretending not to know the ways to go, pretending seeing it for the first time. When a gamer has to come back to the tutorial after 30 hours of The Witcher, Batman or Final Fantasy they would just flyby, but since they present the game to a crowd not knowing this game it is necessary to reduce the pace. “Play bad, stumble, die, like a first timer would” they tell them.

After the start of the presentation where the HUD, Story and some core gameplay elements are shown and explained we are off to the core of the presentation – the nutshell level. Now they play for real.

This is where the experts get most of the information since they watched the start of the game and are now ready to get the full package.

The presentation often end with the last boss, a sudden twist or some surprising gameplay elements found in just one special level. This is to show off more of the scope of the game. After that the discussion about the game starts. The tester is always present to correct minor details if the experts got them wrong – when you compress a 30hrs game into a 3hrs presentation there are always losses. (USK by Email, Sept. 14th 2016)

Subject of rating are materials that “*are intended for publication in the Federal Republic of Germany*” (Art. 11 USK GPS). The object of classification must beyond any doubt be a game version that is intended for publication. After publishing the object of classification, a copy of the sales version is to be sent to USK (Art. 11 (4) USK GPS).

Members of the classification committee and the Permanent Representative may decide about the following classification decisions and appropriate symbols (USK Alterskennzeichen):

- Approved without age restriction
- Approved for children aged 6 and above
- Approved for children aged 12 and above
- Approved for children aged 16 and above
- Not approved for young persons aged under 18



Figure 2: Age rating symbols of USK

If a nuisance of young people is to be feared, the committee can choose to

- Not issue an age rating symbol

In case of doubt an “official expert opinion from the Department for Media Harmful to Young Persons (BPjM) for the purpose of excluding any possible damage effect for young people” (Art. 10 (7) USK GPS), can be requested.

Certain types of games or categories of content cannot be classified at all, such as games having contents inflicting with German Criminal Code, which glorify war, feature humans being exposed to serious physical or mental suffering or injure human dignity (Art. 19 (3) 3. USK GPS). Also games that feature realistic, cruel or horrific portrayals of violence in a way that the game is in overall being dominated by it (Art. 19 (3) 4. USK GPS), or those that present children in unnatural, sexually emphasized postures (Art. 19 (3) 5. USK GPS) and games that in general must be feared as they may cause serious endangerment to the “development of children and young people or their progress to becoming an autonomous and integrated member of society” (Art 19. (3) 6. USK GPS).

USK guarantees to conduct a classification within 15 working days at a max (Art. 10 (9) USK GPS) and to notify applicants immediately after the conclusion was made.

Transparency and documentation is deemed as of high importance and so are decisions that are based on a wide spectrum of opinions and experiences of the members of the rating committees.

The criteria for the classification decisions and the decisions themselves need to be transparent and well documented. The game as a whole will be rated and classification “*may not take place on the basis of personal taste or opinion*” (Art. 2 (4) USK GPS).

The criteria are in constant change, at least every two years they get supervised by the Advisory Council.

According to Art. 21 (2) USK GPS, the classification decisions reached by the committees are adopted by the Permanent Representatives as decisions made by the Supreme Youth Protection Authorities of the Federal States and therefore become applicable for Germany as a whole.

### **3.1.4 Outlook: USK in the online age**

In early 2015 USK joined the new IARC system, a rating system to provide guidance for apps and online games which otherwise would become available without any further observation and thus bypass national rating systems (see below). IARC is meant to more and more replace traditional national / regional rating systems.

## **3.2 ESRA**

### **3.2.1 Legal background**

ESRA, the Entertainment Software Rating Association, was established by Iran’s National Foundation of Computer Games (IRCG) and launched its rating system in 2009 (IRCG Facts Book 2016, 145, but according to ESRA Booklet rating started in 2008 (ESRA Booklet, 7) – other sources state it was 2007<sup>1</sup>) under Iran’s Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance’s supervision as a self-regulatory organization run by Reza Ahmadi as the current president.

IRCG is one of Iran’s Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance affiliated organizations. The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance is responsible for observing and regulating art and culture activities to make sure they are based on the Islamic rules and within the confines of the country’s norms. IRCG is a non-governmental, non-for-profit art and culture organization with an independent legal personality located in Tehran.

The organizational structure is as follows:

- a) Board of trustees (9 members)
- b) Board of directors (5 members)

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1 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Entertainment\\_Software\\_Rating\\_Association](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Entertainment_Software_Rating_Association), 7.10.2016



- c) Chief executive officer
- d) Inspector

The minister of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance is a member and chairman of the board of trustees. The chief executive officer is chosen by recommendation of the members of the board of directors and from among its members followed by the approval of the board of trustees for 3 years.

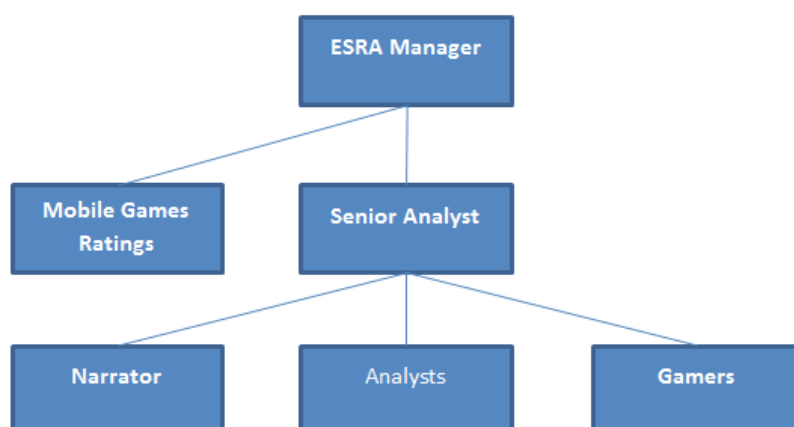
Funds and the assets of the foundation are provided by:

- Financial help from government and organizations
- Movable and immovable properties, cash finances and gifts
- Income provided by investments and services and the contracts made with natural or legal persons.<sup>2</sup>

There are 12 employees in ESRA: three gamers, four analysts, one narrator, one senior analyst, two people for mobile games ratings, and one manager.

Nine experts are present for the final session of ratings (games classification council) who are cultural managers, psychologists, sociologists, and religion (Islam) experts.

The following figure illustrates ESRA's organizational structure:



*Figure 3: ESRA's Organizational Structure*

<sup>2</sup> Original information available in Persian: <http://www.ircg.ir/fa/page/1>, 25.9.2016

### **3.2.2 Changes and phases: The evolution of ESRA**

ESRA as an organization to rate game content according to the age of game players, was planted into an environment without any such experiences. Just like other age rating systems in various parts of the world, ESRA had to find its way and gain respect and acknowledgments from gamers, society and authorities alike.

The different kinds of rating and changes in its structure can be divided into three phases:

#### **3.2.2.1 Working out the basic guidelines: Vol. 1-9**

The First Phase of ESRA was what can be called the “Research phase”. In summary the following steps were taken:

1. Studying and analyzing computer game rating organizations in other countries
2. Considering the contents in those organizations and their usages
3. Extracting the game contents
4. Planning and defining the contents in 8 main branches
5. Determining the age groups and presenting the distinguishing points of each
6. Considering the level and kind of relation between each content and the age groups
7. Designing and defining the computer game age rating (ESRA Booklet, p. 6)

In the research phase, the contents of video games were analyzed and 187 harmful types of contents under 8 main categories were extracted.

- Violence
- Fear
- Discrimination
- Vulgar language
- Gambling
- Alcoholic drinks and drugs and tobacco
- Sexual themes
- Violation of values

The results of this phase were recorded in 9 volumes which serve as the guidelines for any ESRA rating procedure and provide a solid foundation for designing the rating system based on Iran's social and religious norms and values. In these volumes ESRA has reviewed the identified types of content from three different points of views: psychological, Islamic and sociological – whose findings and studies directly affect the design of a proper age rating system. These are the brief overviews of these 9 volumes (ESRA Guidelines) including the headlines of the main chapters (there are hundreds of sub-chapters which go into incredible detail):

### **Volume 1**

The first volume is dedicated to leisure time and the related theories and then games and the related theories. The function of games is reviewed and video games and their classification into different genres are defined in detail.

This volume is divided into 6 chapters:

- Introduction
- Leisure time
- Games
- Recreation and games in Islam
- Computer games
- Computer games and age rating.

It is in this volume that the importance of a national age rating system is demonstrated.

### **Volume 2**

This volume first examines the researches done on computer games and their effects, then reviews other age rating systems in the world and concludes in emphasizing the importance of conducting a national rating system.

The chapters in this volume are:

1. Introduction
2. Researches regarding computer games

3. ESRB
4. PEGI
5. CERO
6. OFLC Australia
7. OFLC New Zealand
8. USK
9. DJCTQ
10. GRB
11. Outdated systems
12. Banned games in different countries
13. Problems of using the existing age rating systems

One important thing that is mentioned in this volume is that the most important reason why none of these systems can be used for age rating the games in Iran is the cultural difference between Iran and the other countries and the fact that what one country does not see as a harmful content is reviewed based on Iran's norms and values as harmful. Therefore designing a system based on Iran's values carried out by those fully familiar with these values, is considered to be of an utmost importance.

### **Volume 3**

This volume reviews the important age groups and their characteristics and common traits based on 3 different perspectives: psychological, religious and sociological.

The chapters are:

1. Introduction
2. Age from the viewpoint of Islam
3. Age from the viewpoint of sociology
4. Age from the viewpoint of psychology
5. Conclusion

In the concluding chapter, six different age groups, 3-7, 7-12, 12-15, 15-18, 18-25, 25 and above, are reviewed based on the mentioned fields.

Note: back in 2008 the average age of marriage in Iran was 25+. ESRA trying to authenticate some games and avoid banning, because some of the games had sexual clothing contents or extreme violence in them, offered 25+ in order to make those games publishable. Back then, games could not be edited in clothing using the edition technology but since this tool is now used extensively to fix the sexual clothing in games ESRA omitted the 25+ rating.

All 25+ games were banned after the omission of the 25+ group but based on publisher requests for re-rating, some of them were re-rated. (some of 25+ games could be rated even 3+ or even 7+ after the editions were applied). In summary, some of those games are still banned while others were re-rated.

#### **Volume 4**

This volume reviews the harmful contents in video games in detail.

The harmful criteria is extracted and divided under 8 main categories as shown above.

The chapters are:

1. Introduction
2. Form (how natural or cartoonish content looks) and content (real, fictional etc.)
3. Key words
4. Rating criteria (the 8 categories)

Among notable factors considered are whether the scenes are natural looking or cartoonish and whether they are related to the protagonist or not.

#### **Volumes 5 and 6**

These two volumes are dedicated to Islamic viewpoint on the harmful criteria.

Volume 5 is divided to 2 sections. Section one is covered in volume 5 and section two in volume 6.

The chapters in volume 5 are:

1. Introduction
2. Violence
3. Fear
4. Discrimination
5. Vulgar language
6. Gambling and betting
7. Sexual theme
8. The chapters in volume 6 are:
9. Alcoholic drinks, drugs and tobacco
10. Violation of values
11. The final table of age classification

In chapter 3 of the volume 6 each harmful content is given a rating based on the Islamic law, for instance in the category of fear, “display of killing wild animals” has received 7+.

Note: these individual ratings were done as initial studies and are now used only as guidelines; they do not independently determine the rating of a game.

### **Volume 7**

This volume is dedicated to a sociological viewpoint on the harmful content.

The chapters are:

1. Introduction
2. Research theory
3. Research model
4. Content factors
5. Contents in age groups
6. Conclusion

In this volume, the harmful contents are rated based on only sociological viewpoint so for instance in the category of fear, “display of killing wild animals” has received 12+. A detailed explanation for each rating is also provided afterward.

### **Volume 8**

This volume is dedicated to psychological viewpoint on the harmful content.

The chapters are:

1. Introduction
2. Research method
3. Findings of the first stage
4. Findings of the second stage
5. Conclusion

In this volume we see the harmful contents being rated based on only psychological viewpoints (see Shariat et al. 2009) so for instance in the category of fear, “display of killing wild animals” has received 7+.

Note: as it is explained in this volume Delphi method is used to determine the ratings of the contents based on the psychological perspective. Delphi method is a “collaborative estimating or forecasting technique that combines independent analysis with maximum use of feedback, for building consensus among experts who interact anonymously. The topic under discussion is circulated (in a series of rounds) among participating experts who comment on it and modify the opinion(s) reached up to that point ... and so on until some degree of mutual agreement is reached. Also called delphi forecasting.”<sup>3</sup>

Findings of the first stage and Findings of the second stage in this volume illustrate the results of the two rounds of the Delphi method.

---

3 <http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/delphi-method.html>, 1.10.2016

## **Volume 9**

The last volume explains the rating process and also the content descriptors and the final rating of harmful contents which were rated in the previous volumes based on different viewpoints.

The chapters are:

1. Introduction
2. Methodology
3. Final age group
4. Classification of the criteria
5. Rating process

In this volume a table such as the following is provided for the extracted harmful contents and the final age group is assigned:

Content :	Display of killing wild animals	
Viewpoint	Age group	Final age group
Islamic	7+	12+
Sociological	12+	
Psychological	7+	

*Table 1: Views on harmful content (ESRA Guidelines, Volume 9, 21)*

### 3.2.2.2 Start of the rating process: age classifications

After the research phase, the Second Phase of ESRA was Implementation. When they started rating games based on the age groups they had settled on:

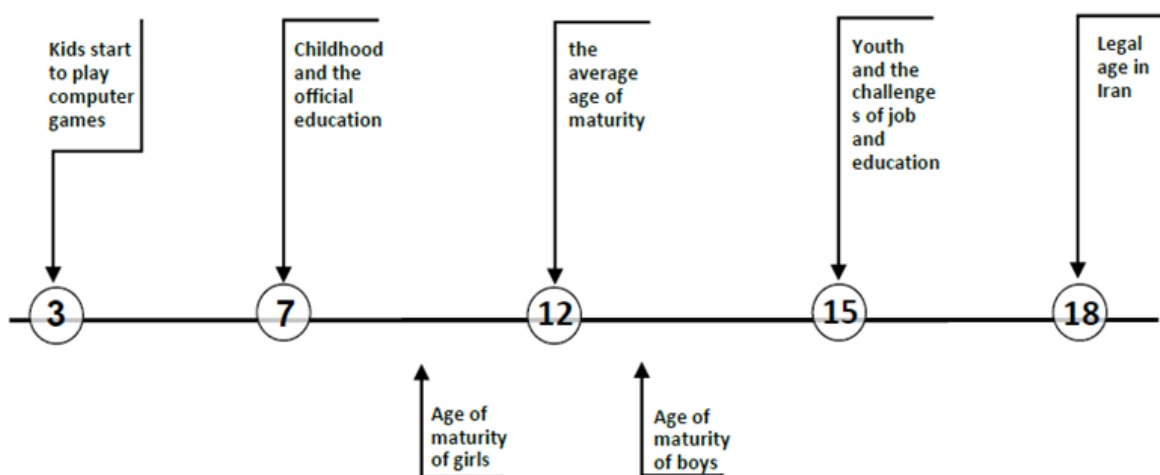


*Figure 4: Age rating symbols of ESRA (intl. version)*



- +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 (IRCG Facts Book, 145)

Note: 25+ was another group that was used for rating the games but it was removed in 2009.



*Figure 5: This diagram of individual development is based on physical anatomy and movement ability, mental development, emotions, and social development (ESRA Booklet, 7)*

### 3.2.2.3 Experiences, results and evolution

ESRA having used this system for three years faced problems like deficiencies in definitions, overlaps and inflexibilities (ESRA Booklet, 8) in their rating and went through the Third Phase (the second phase of research). After carrying out more research including holding discussions with various experts and specialists they provided a new proposal which along with other changes to make the system more flexible also reduced the number of main contents to just 7:

- Violence
- Tobacco and drugs
- Sexual stimuli
- Fear
- Religious values violation

- Violation of social norms
- Hopelessness

In this phase 400 videos with harmful contents which were extracted from video games, along with a questionnaire were sent to psychologists, sociologists and educational scientists. After having watched the videos and filling the forms they were sent to ESRA and then to Parand Specialized Center for Human Enhancement to be analyzed in two ways of descriptive and inferential statistics.

ESRA has been working with the new system up until today going through minor changes and updating the staff members and experts whenever necessary.

### 3.2.3 Dealing with harmful content

In its first years of establishment, ESRA carried out substantial researches to provide a solid foundation for the rating of the games, the result of which is recorded in 9 volumes each dedicated to a specific topic. By using sociological, psychological and Islamic approaches during the research phase ESRA studied and analyzed different aspects of games and game rating. 3 of the 9 volumes are dedicated to the viewpoint of these distinct fields of knowledge about the harmful content extracted by the analysts and each extracted content (187 entries under 8 main categories – see 3.2.2.1 – ESRA Booklet, 6) being rated individually by these fields.

Volume 5 and 6 reviews the Islamic point of view regarding the harmful contents. In these volumes however no direct connection is made between these rulings and the rating of the contents.

۴-۱۲. استفاده مواد مخدر غیرمرتبط با قهرمان داستان  
منظور از این مورد، نمایش دادن استعمال هرگونه مواد مخدرو یا آموزش چگونگی  
استعمال آن می‌باشد. در این مورد استعمال توسط قهرمان داستان انجام نمی‌گیرد.



Figure 6: Use of drugs unrelated to the protagonist (ESRA Guidelines, Volume 4, 80)

Volume 7 covers the sociology point of view on the harmful content and rates them accordingly. This volume studies AGIL paradigm, a social scheme developed by Talcott Parsons (1902-1979) which is briefly explained amongst other things in this volume. Special attention is given to the four minimum conditions necessary for survival of any society: adaptation, goal attainment, integration, latency. 65 pages of this volume therefore, explain the scientific background for the rating of the sociology department. Then, tables containing the harmful contents are provided where contents are rated individually and some explanation regarding the rating is again provided. For instance:

Fear	
12+	<b>Display of torture tools</b>
With regards to the explanations in the related tables, this content can be put under the 12+ category following this assumption that the childhood is passed and those above 12+ are able (in normal situations) to understand the border between reality and imagination and control their fear.	

Table 2: Torture tools (ESRA Guidelines, Volume 7, 92)

Volume 8 is about the psychological approach and the rating of the contents based on this approach. First the research method is explained thoroughly then ratings are provided although no more explanation is provided in the tables anymore. To carry out the ratings Delphi method is used to be able to benefit from different opinions of people with different specialties. Eight psychologists with different specialties helped to carry out this research (ESRA Guidelines, Volume 8, 4).

Since each harmful content is rated individually by these sociological, psychological and Islamic viewpoints and since despite the existence of similarity in the ratings there are instances where the ratings of these 3 fields differ with one another, a scientific method was required to come to a final rating based on these 3 different approaches. In volume 9 explanations regarding different methods of finalizing a rating such as “*Mode and median*” is explained and their advantages and disadvantages are reviewed (the findings of which is beyond the scope of this article). In the end however despite the fact that the weighted arithmetic mean is suggested to be the best and most reliable method the “*Maximum method*” is chosen since assigning different weights to different contents was a very time consuming process and required expert opinions and experience in age rating and the effects of the harmful content (ESRA Guidelines, Volume 9, 25). Maximum method selects the data with the highest amount. For instance hugging (between opposite sexes and putting ones head on their shoulder or chest) is rated 25+ based on the Islamic view, 18+ based on the sociological view and 15+ based on the psychological view. Now the final age group will be 25+ based on the maximum method. However it is also mentioned (ibid.) that maximum method is a very safe and conservative method that covers all the possible harmful effects and doesn't have the disadvantages of the other systems but using this method results in higher age categories and

reduces the trusts of the people in the ratings, therefore this method cannot fulfill the wishes of ESRA permanently but for the time being since the day ESRA can provide the necessary tools to use the weighted mean method, maximum method is the safest option (ibid.). Again it should be stressed that while the guidelines mention a 25+ rating, the maximum rating at the moment is 18+.

The advantage of the weighted mean method is that it is able to consider the importance of each approach in rating of different harmful content. For instance in matters related to fear the importance of the psychological viewpoint is higher than the other two just as the Islamic view is in sexual matters or sociology in violation of values.

Since each field (sociology, psychology and Islam) have rated the harmful contents individually one can see which have banned what.

a) Sociology has banned nothing. (without considering the 25+ ratings)

b) Psychology point of view has banned the followings (without considering the 25+ ratings):

1. Real Gambling (ESRA Guidelines, Volume 8, 165)
2. Rape (ibid., 169)
3. Child abuse (ibid.)
4. Urophilia (ibid.)
5. Corpophilia (ibid.)
6. Necrophilia (ibid.)
7. Sacrilege of the Prophet (ibid.)

c) Islamic Point of view has banned the followings (without considering the 25+ ratings):

1. Real gambling (ESRA Guidelines, Volume 6, 306)
2. showing tools or devices that are related to sexual relationships (ibid., 312)
3. display of a situation or a space that is related to sexual relationships (ibid.)
4. embracing (ibid.)
5. sexual tone of speech (ibid.)
6. using sexual metaphors (ibid.)
7. touching or caressing non erogenous zones (ibid.)
8. walking provocatively (ibid.)

9. wearing make up on the face or other parts of the body in a way that would arouse sexual attention (ibid.)
10. sexual conversation (ibid.)
11. display of sexual matter using body parts (ibid.) (Such as holding the genitals with hands or using tongue and hands to convey sexual meanings) (ESRA Guidelines, Volume4, 89)
12. male and female dancing together (ibid.)
13. Display of a scene with a character being sexually aroused (ibid., 313)
14. Dancing provocatively (ibid.)
15. Natural display of half-naked women (ibid.)
16. Wearing lace (ibid.)
17. Natural display of wearing just underwear (ibid.)
18. Cartoonish display of wearing just underwear (ibid.)
19. Display of a shadow of a body that is naked (ibid.)
20. Kissing lips (ibid.)
21. Display of the genitals (ibid.)
22. Display of a shadow of a sexual relationship between same and opposite genders (ibid.)
23. Display of a scene related to the character doing masturbation (ibid.)
24. Just hearing the voice of a character reaching orgasm (ibid.)
25. Touching erogenous zones below the clothes from under or above the clothes in a way that the erogenous zones won't be seen (ibid.)
26. Display of a naked body (ibid.)
27. Display of a naked body (in any way) showing genitals (ibid.)
28. Display of genitals (ibid.)
29. Sex (ibid.)
30. Sexual relationship (ibid.)
31. Rape (ibid.)
32. Child abuse (ibid., 314)
33. Urophilia (ibid.)
34. Corpophilia (ibid.)
35. Urinating on each other (ibid.)

36. Necrophilia (ibid.)

37. Zoophilia (ibid.)

38. Homosexuality (ibid.)

Note: in matters with sexual themes the Islamic view has provided two different tables that rate the same contents with two different perspectives. One rating is for when there is no fear of these sexual contents putting the gamers at risk of doing them or provoking them to do sinful activities, and the other perspective is when such fear is imminent. The difference this has made in the rating of the contents is that with the first perspective in mind those contents have been banned (the mentioned banned contents above are taken from the first perspective), but some of these contents have been rated in light of the second perspective (although the ratings are mostly 25+ which is now omitted by ESRA, this means that these contents that received 25+ are banned when considered as independent entities and must be edited in the game or else the game would not be rated by ESRA).

It might seem that the Islamic viewpoint has had the easiest job rating since whatever that has been forbidden to do in Islam one assumes has been banned in games. But it might not be quite the case. – the following observation is regarding the time there was a 25+, these days since ESRA has removed 25+ there are more contents that are banned if no editions are made to them. This means in the past unreal gambling was rated 25+ but now this content cannot be shown in games and needs to be edited out of it.

Under the main category of gambling (prior to the third phase) there are 3 entries: existence of gambling in games, unreal gambling and real gambling.



Figure 7: “Unreal Gambling” (ESRA Guidelines, Volume 4, 74)

In volume 4 definitions of these 3 are provided:

Existence of gambling: is a display of an image or a scene in the game that includes gambling by those other than the player, such as display of gambling done by others or narrating a story about gambling by someone else (ESRA Guidelines, Volume4, 73).

Unreal gambling: it means gambling does happen during the game by the player but not gambling on real money (ibid., 74).

Real gambling: it means the gambling that happens during the game and the player is a part of it for real money. Like games in which credit cards are used (ibid.).

Now, gambling according to Islamic rules is forbidden. The exceptions are: if a game has become a part of the norm and is not known as a gambling game anymore and/or if there is no real money involved (unreal gambling) (ESRA Guidelines, Volume 4, 98).

There is a difference in gambling and betting:

- Gambling is downright forbidden.
- There are lots of hadiths and narrations about gambling or buying and selling its tools or even teaching it being forbidden.
- In order to win in a gamble one must hate the opponent.
- In real gambling money is lost without having gained anything. And this money has been lost for nothing: “And *eat* up not one another’s property unjustly” Quran Sura 2 / Chapter al-Baqarah, verse 188
- Instruments of gambling include what is played with to win or lose in the norm of the society (ESRA Guidelines, Volume 4, 98).

When looking at the rating of these three entries only one is banned and that is the Real Gambling. Existence of gambling has received 12+ and unreal gambling 7+ by the Islamic experts. What might be interesting to mention is that these two last entries of gambling have received a lower age group by the Islamic scholars than the psychologists and the experts:

Content :	Existence of Gambling	
Viewpoint	Age group	Final age group
Islamic	12+	18+
Sociological	15+	
Psychological	18+	

Table 3: Views on the Existence of Gambling (ESRA Guidelines, Volume 9, 53)

Content :	Unreal Gambling	
Viewpoint	Age group	Final age group
Islamic	7+	18+
Sociological	18+	
Psychological	18+	

Table 4: Views on Unreal Gambling (ibid.)

Content :	Real Gambling	
Viewpoint	Age group	Final age group
Islamic	banned	banned
Sociological	25+	
Psychological	banned	

Table 5: Views on Real Gambling (ibid.)



## ۳-۴. وجود مشروبات الکلی مرتبط با قهرمان داستان

منظور از این مورد، نمایش دادن هر گونه مشروبات الکلی، مراکز فروش یا نوشیدن مشروبات الکلی، حالت مستی و یا هر چیزی که دلالت بر مشروبات الکلی داشته باشد، است. در این مورد این مواد یا حالات مربوط به قهرمان داستان، که شخصیت پیروز و محبوب بازی است، می‌باشد. به عنوان مثال در خانه یا وسایل شخصی قهرمان داستان مشروبات الکلی وجود دارد.



Figure 8: “Existence of alcohol” (ESRA Guidelines, Volume 4, 76)

Among the activities considered forbidden in Islam are drinking and the use of drugs. Drinking is downright forbidden in Islam and there are several qur’anic verses supporting this<sup>4</sup>:

*“Say: My Lord forbiddeth only indecencies, such of them as are apparent and such as are within, and sin and wrongful oppression, and that ye associate with Allah that for which no warrant hath been revealed, and that ye tell concerning Allah that which ye know not”*

Surah 7, al-A’raf (The Elevated Places) verse no. 33 (ESRA Guidelines, Volume 6, 168)

*“O ye who believe! Draw not near unto prayer when ye are drunken, till ye know that which ye utter, ...”*

Surah 4, an-Nisa’ (Women) verse no. 43 (ibid.)

*“They question thee about strong drink and games of chance. Say: In both is great sin and (some) utility for men; but the sin of them is greater than their usefulness ...”*

Surah 2, al-Baqarah (The Cow) verse no. 219 (ibid.)

4 As translated by Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall (1938): The Meaning of the Glorious Quran. Online: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/isl/pick/index.htm>, 12.10.2016

*“O ye who believe! Strong drink and games of chance and idols and divining arrows are only an infamy of Satan’s handiwork. Leave it aside in order that ye may succeed.”*

Surah 5, al-Ma’idah (The Food) verse no. 90 (ibid.)

And many hadiths and sayings from Imams and the prophets support this as well (ibid., 169).

Another example is the use of drugs which is again forbidden in Islam based on various sayings (ibid., 175).

However none of the twenty entries under the main category of alcohol, drugs and tobacco has been rated “banned” by the Islamic experts. *The use* of alcohol or drugs by the protagonist or others have received the highest rating 25+ by the Islamic experts and 18+ by the sociologist and 25+ by the psychologists when they were used by the protagonist and 15+ when they were used by others (ibid., 307).

But the question is why isn’t existence or use of alcohol or drugs in games banned since in Islamic teachings it is?

Note: 25+ is now omitted from ESRA rating system, as it was explained earlier (see 3.2.2.1 above – Note to Vol. 3). Meaning all of those contents are now banned unless they are edited to somehow make the banned contents representable.

### **3.2.4 Cultural modifications of “banned contents”**

Since quite a number of contents are banned from Islamic or psychological points of view and since many of these contents are evident in games demanded by the Iranian market or the Iranian youth, it is necessary to make some alterations to make rating (and publication) of such games possible at all. These changes are so subtle and professionally done that most players do not even notice them and in most cases one would have a hard time trying to figure out the changes. In fact it is a necessary requirement by ESRA that alterations, which are made to make games legally publishable in Iran’s market, be in such a way that the gamers do not notice them and unless they are of such high quality ESRA refuses to accept the changes and sends them back for refinement. It is only after these problematic scenes are removed that a game goes under the rating procedure. According to ESRA presence of nudity in a game does not elevate the age group; it leads to the complete ban of the game. Therefore these “cultural modifications” are done as a preliminary step to make games ready to be age rated. In other words, ESRA rate the game on conditions: if the game and those scenes are edited, it will be authorized.

If a game seems not likely to be publishable on the Iranian market a delicate process is about to be initiated.

First of all it must be reminded that Iran has not signed international copyright agreements. Therefore, most of the international games are released with no proper agreements with the original developer or publisher.

Publishers of such (pirated) games have less trouble with developers who are possibly unwilling to do any changes, but also have no access to the games architecture – under normal circumstances. The “Iranian solution” is to basically hack any game that needs to come out but is not yet considered suitable for the players.

Here textures become altered or even complete characters removed and narration changed in order to reflect these changes. The result is of a surprising quality; even the gameplay is not affected.



*Figure 9: Covering body parts... (Iran Games Industry Booklet 2016, 19)*

As it can be seen, naked / uncovered parts of the hips, shoulders or chests are hidden by altered textures.



Figure 10: ... with new textures (*ibid.*, 20)

Among the changes done are also those that are related to belief systems or norms of the Iranians. For instance a scene with the characters prostrating to idols might be edited by removing those idol entities resp. the character not kneeling down before it (since according to Islamic law it is forbidden to prostrate for anything or anyone other than God).



Figure 11: No prostration to unholy beings

An important scene in the unedited (left) and the edited Persian version (right) of Dark Souls III can be seen above: No prostrating to any unholy beings (ESRA educational video, Dark Souls III 2.mp4). The character remains standing and is not kneeling down.

On the other hand this procedure is not legal outside Iran, and while it shows the technical skills of Iranian developers being able to not only remove something but to add changes and still keep up the game play and a plausible storyline, it's also a disturbing experience to see intellectual property of others being treated this way. These creative changes could be seen as artistic performance or also as a waste of resources, since the combination of the original game developers' abilities with abilities of the creative Iranian hackers could set free a number of positive impulses everybody would benefit from. ESRA points out that despite their interest to work with original developers and publishers, due to political reasons within the last years it was not possible to request modification for Islamic countries (comment by Morteza Bigdeli, ESRA, Oct. 10th, 2016). Next to this however, it is to be assumed that the uncertainty caused by the absence of any intellectual property rights in Iran may play an even greater role. Applying changes for local markets is expensive, and if there is no assurance as to how many companies will finally distribute the game and whether loyalty payments exist or not, the interest to do so remains very low at best.

### **3.2.5 ESRA's rating process**

How are games classified and rated in ESRA?

To age rate games ESRA takes the following 6 steps:

#### **1. Publisher submits the game to ESRA for rating**

Publishing companies are supposed to send the games they want to distribute in Iran to ESRA for age rating. These companies send their request for rating plus two copies of the game to ESRA.

#### **2. Registering the request of the publisher and collecting primary information of the game**

In this stage the request of the publisher for age rating and the primary information of the game (assigning a unique code to the game, full name of the game, genre, platforms of the game, the international release date, producer and the international publisher of the game, other ratings of the game by other rating systems in the world and the date of the publisher's request) is registered in the data bank of ESRA.

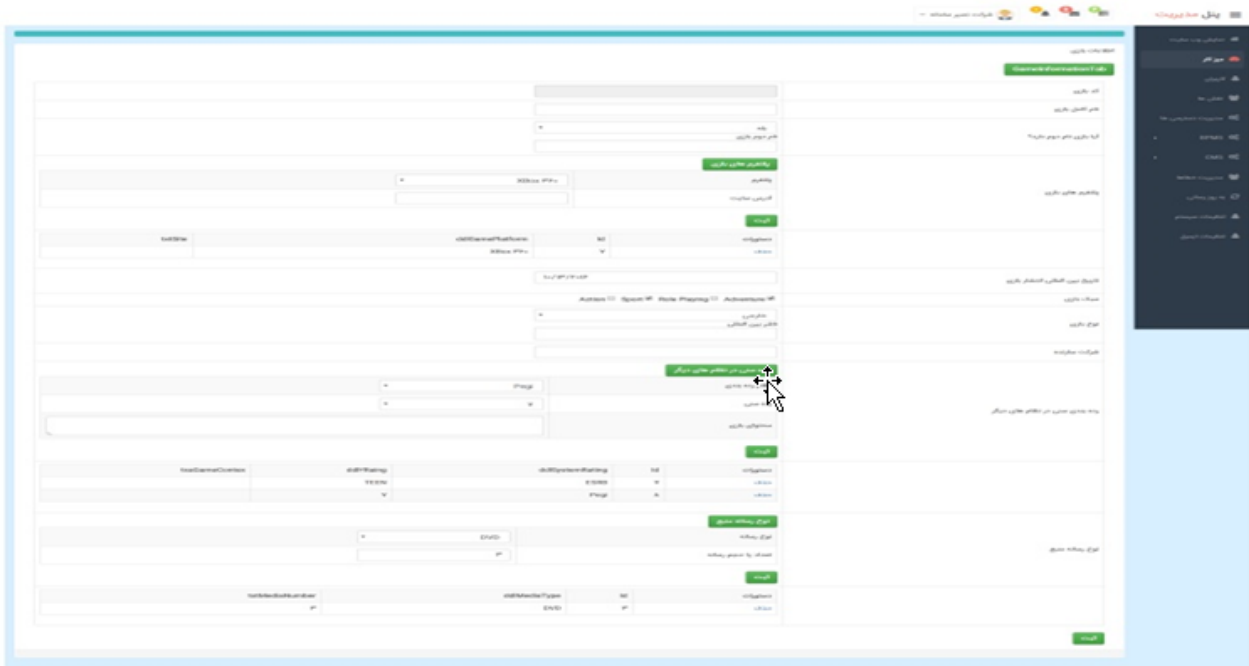


Figure 12: All details and aspects relevant to a game are entered into ESRA's database

### 3. Sending the game to the video production department and sending the complete specifications of the game to the narrator

In this stage the game sent by the publishers is sent to the video production department where the gamers play the game from the beginning to end recording everything they do. After having done this, gamers answer questions prepared for them in ESRA software (question such as: how long it took to play the game, the overall story of the game, the missions inside the game, the tools and weapons that are used in the game and also recording the harmful criteria that the gamer sees in the game (from the gamer's point of view).)

While the game is being played by the gamers, the narrator extracts the complete story of the game and also uses texts produced by the gamer. The game's story plus all of its details are recorded by the narrator in ESRA's data bank.

### 4. Sending the provided video of the game plus its story to the content analysts department

Analysts read the information provided by the narrator to get familiar with the story and the atmosphere of the game.

In this stage the analysts who are fully familiar with the harmful contents in games (the content explained by psychologists, sociologists and religious experts in the ESRA research) watch

the game from beginning to end and extract all the harmful content in form of pictures and videos of 2 to 3 minutes and record them all in ESRA’s data bank.

The table below is a part of a report by the analysts which is done after watching the video of the game.

Table - Some parts of analyst report for Fallout 4

File No	Type	Time	Main Content	Sub Content 1	Sub Content 2	Other Contents
69	.jpg	5:29:00	Alcoholic Drinks	Existence	Ware	
70	.jpg	5:29:15	Sexual	Explicit	Model, Clothing	
71	.mpg	5:30:30	Fear	Accident	Monster	Horror voice, Killing
72	.jpg	5:44:10	Social Abnormality	Language	weak	
73	.jpg	5:46:07	Social Abnormality	Language	weak	
74	.jpg	5:47:13	Alcohol Drinks	Existence	Ware	
75	.jpg	5:48:00	Fear	Environment	Dead Bodies	
76	.jpg	5:48:05	Sexual	Explicit	Character Clothing, Intense	
77	.mpg	5:49:25	Violence	Killing	Intense, with Blood	
78	.mpg	5:57:00	Violence	Killing	Intense, with Blood	
79	.jpg	6:01:52	Drugs	Existence	Words	
80	.jpg	6:02:32	Fear	Environment	Dead Bodies	
81	.jpg	6:05:30	Alcoholic Drinks	Existence	Ware	
82	.jpg	6:05:35	Smokes	Existence	Ware	
83	.mpg	6:05:30	Violence	Killing	Intense, with Blood	
84	.jpg	6:06:06	Alcoholic Drinks	Existence	Ware	
85	.jpg	6:06:08	Alcoholic Drinks	Existence	Ware	
86	.jpg	6:08:08	Sexual	Explicit	Character Clothing, Weak	
87	.jpg	6:09:30	Fear	Environment	Blood	
88	.mpg	6:12:15	Fear	Accident	Monster	
89	.jpg	6:19:05	Fear	Accident	Monster	
90	.mpg	6:27:10	Fear	Accident	Monster	
91	.mpg	6:29:00	Fear	Accident	Monster	
92	.mpg	6:30:50	Fear	Accident	Monster	
93	.jpg	6:43:50	Violence	Battle	No Blood, Weak	
94	.jpg	6:44:30	Consider	Symbol		
95	.jpg	6:50:10	Fear	Accident	Monster	
96	.jpg	6:52:22	Alcoholic Drinks	Existence	Ware	
97	.jpg	6:55:29	Alcoholic Drinks	Existence	Ware	
98	.jpg	6:55:37	Alcoholic Drinks	Existence	Ware	
99	.jpg	6:57:07	Social Abnormality	Language	Intense	

Figure 13: A part of a very detailed list of all problematic scenes in Fallout 4

The analysts record the time taken to analyze the game and since they have watched the game and are fully aware of the harmful contents of the game, record their suggested age category in ESRA’s data bank.

**5. Determining the final age category for the requested game**

In this stage all the gathered information regarding the game is analyzed and reevaluated in a session with the ESRA manager, the manager of the analyzing department, the expert who analyzed the game and the gamer who played the game. Then after checking all the harmful content of the game, the manager of ESRA based on the content of the game and adjusting them to the comments of the physiological, sociological and Islamic religious experts determines the appropriate age group for the game.

**6. Approving ESRA’s assigned age group by members of the games classification council**

Members of the classification council, including cultural managers of the country and a representative of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, watch parts of the game together and the manager of ESRA provides them with some explanations regarding it after the announcement of the appropriate age group assigned by ESRA. The members of the council then can announce either their approval or in rare cases their disapproval. In the case of disapproval the game is either banned or is sent for further editing

(ESRA Games Rating Process document (Persian), p. 6-7):

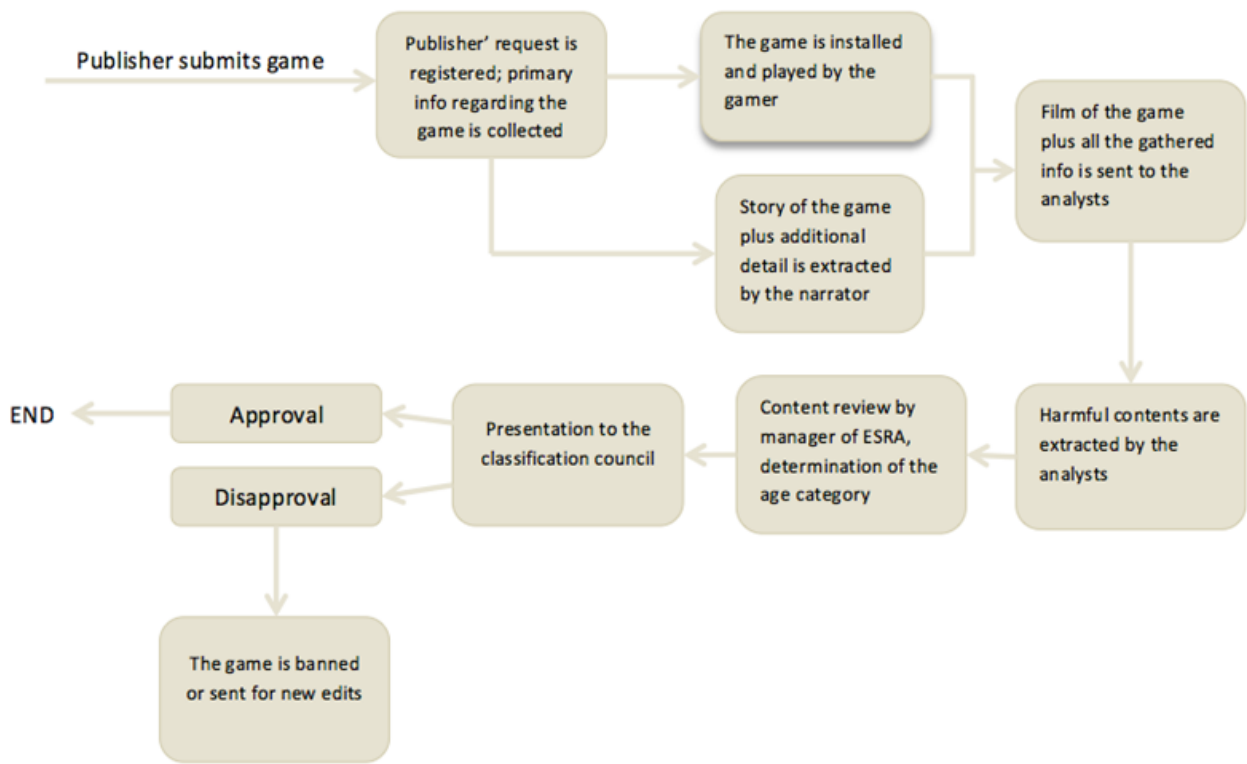


Figure 14: The age rating classification procedure at ESRA



However, it is important to note that these ratings are *post-edit* ratings since international productions will first be reviewed, then edited by cutting out or altering offending texts, artwork or other elements before they finally get rated (see examples below at 5.1).

### 3.2.5.1 *The analysis perspective*

In order to determine the proper rating, ESRA analyzes the game from 4 perspectives (ESRA Booklet, p. 12):

#### 1. Player-based perspective

One of the most significant factors in rating is considering the emotions and the excitement that the player experiences during a game. This perspective is much related to the genre of the game.

#### 2. Analyzer-based perspective

Extracting and categorizing the most evident harmful contents in games (killing, consuming drugs and alcohol, using vulgar words, displaying the sexual scenes, fearful accidents, etc.) and also the quality and quantity of the contents are the most significant factors in rating games.

#### 3. Narrator-based perspective

Extracting and reviewing story of the games to search for the meaning of symbols and hidden concepts in them and finding the relation between the game story with the previous versions and the basis of the games which could be books and movies, are the things to be done based on the narrator perspective.

#### 4. Observer-based perspective

Observing the incidents and outcomes regarding the game such as the reviews it has received, its cultural and social effects, the legal proceedings against it, sale statistics and the rating of other rating organizations in the world are the complement of the other three perspectives to evaluate the exact and correct rating of the game.

### 3.2.5.2 Game Reports

In order for the families to be able to make wise choices in selecting the right games for their children, ESRA also provides a report on each game. The most important parts of these reports are the following (ESRA Games Rating Process document (Persian), 10):

- The genre and the plot of the story for families to get familiar with the atmosphere of the game
- The harmful contents in the game for families' awareness
- The required skill for playing the game

The following is a part of the report of fallout 4 (ibid., 11):

سازمان ESRA در راستای افزایش آگاهی خانواده های ایرانی در خصوص بازی هایی که برای فرزندان خود انتخاب می کنند گزارشی از بازی را برای آنها ارائه می دهند که مهمترین قسمتهای این گزارش شامل:

- نوع گیم پلی و داستان کلی از بازی جهت آشنایی خانواده ها با فضای بازی
- مشخص کردن محتوای آسیب رسان بازی جهت آگاهی خانواده ها از این محتواها
- مشخص کردن مقدار مهارت مورد نیاز برای انجام بازی

گزارش زیر نمونه از گزارش یک بازی می باشد که توسط سازمان ESRA تهیه شده است.

**نام بازی: Fallout 4**

PC	پلتفرم	اطلاعات بازی
Bethesda Game Studios	شرکت سازنده	
Nov/10/2015	تاریخ انتشار	
درآیندی	نوع سبوس	
84/100	امتیاز منتقدین	
418	رده سنی اسرا	

مبارزه های خشن برای بقا ، تلاش برای ادامه زندگی در دنیایی بحرانی زده

Figure 15: A part of the final written report of a game...

Different from the internal reports, which are more technical, the final consumer reports will focus on the game itself, the story and the gameplay.

### مبارزه‌های خشن برای بقا، تلاش برای ادامه زندگی در دنیای بی‌رحمان زده

در ادامه سری بازی های *Fallout 4*، *Fallout 4* به بازار آمد. *Fallout 4* یک بازی تک نفره (Single Player) و اکشن - نقش آفرینی (Action - RPG) است. داستان این بازی ۲۱۰ سال پس از یک جنگ اتمی در سال ۲۲۸۷ آغاز می‌شود. بازیکن که در شهر نیمه مخروبه بوستون کار خود را آغاز می‌کند باید به دنبال فرزند گم شده خود بگردد. این بازی طایفه‌های فرعی متعدد و جذابی است که حتی داستان اصلی را نیز تحت الشعاع قرار می‌دهند. در طول بازی، بازیکن در سرزمینی با فضای جنگ زده و مخروبه با انسان‌ها و موجودات عجیب الخلقه ای روبرو می‌شود و باید آنها را نلود کند. بازیکن این قابلیت را دارد که تقریباً تمام وسایلی که در محیط می‌یابد را قایل کند و با استفاده از آنها سلاح‌های خود را ارتقا دهد. همچنین، این توانایی را دارد که با استفاده از وسایل خود سرینه بسازد و با سلبه خود آن را طراحی کند. در طول بازی، بازیکن می‌تواند برای خود هم‌راهی انتخاب کند که در طول بازی و جنگ‌هایی که لحظ می‌دهد او را همراهی کند. در این بازی می‌توان از زلوه دید لول شخص و سوم شخص استفاده کرد. *Fallout 4* تنها به مبارزه و جستجو خلاصه نمی‌شود و بازیکن می‌تواند با کاراکترهای دیگر بازی نیز ارتباط برقرار کند. هیچ داستانی *Fallout 4* صداگذاری و کنترل بازیکن، بویژه در هنگام مبارزه بسیار دقیق کار شده اما گرافیک بازی در بسیاری از موارد کمتر از حد انتظار است. هوش مصنوعی استفاده شده در بازی پیوستگی و عملکرد لازم را ندارد و طراحی سرینه نیز به زمان و دقت بالایی دارد که در اکثر موارد بسیار خسته کننده می‌شود. تصمیماتی که بازیکن در طول بازی اتخاذ می‌کند تأثیر مستقیم بر روند بازی دارند و این آزادی به او داده شده تا مسیر داستان را به دلخواه خود تعیین کند.

لازم است پدر و مادر ها بدانند که *Fallout 4* یک بازی بسیار خشن و با تمایز فرولان خون است. در طول بازی، بازیکن هم با موجودات عجیب الخلقه هم با موجوداتی با شمایلی انسان و هم با انسان‌هایی روبرو می‌شود که باید آنها را از بین ببرد. در *Fallout 4* بازیکن می‌تواند از انواع بسیار زیادی از سلاح استفاده کند و آنها را ارتقا دهد. اجساد افرادی که بازیکن نلود می‌کند در محیط باقی می‌ماند و از بین نمی‌روند البته باید به این نکته اشاره کرد که هدف اصلی کاراکتر در این بازی یافتن فرزندش است اما تصمیم گیری درباره صانکره و نحوه

Figure 16: ... that will later be put online as a reference for parents, teachers and gamers alike

The reports that are meant to be made publicly accessible will refer to any rated, thus edited version. They will also mention featured instances of violence, fear, social abnormality or disappointment, but not, as USK's reports, focus on problematic content and dangers for users in unrated versions.

Note: these reports aren't yet available. The ESRA website will be online soon for this part, and these reports will be public for the families and other interested parties.

### 3.2.6 ESRA in the online age

While physical games are rated with a higher rate of attention and require the final rating to be accepted by the game classification council, online games and apps that will be released not in shops but only in online places like cafe bazaar, are dealt with differently in that here these games will not be fully played through and, although a report is being created, no final decision by the council is necessary.

With apps it is only one expert who plays the game, no other gamers need to play it and apps also get rated after they were released – a major difference to the international IARC system (see

below). ESRA is not relying on an online questionnaire developers can use like IARC because developers may not be entirely familiar with contents or could tend to rate a game according to their own attitudes. Such apps still get played by an ESRA expert and subsequently become rated. Repetitive games will be played until the game patterns become visible while more complex games like RPGs and adventures will be played fully (comment by Morteza Bigdeli, Oct. 10th 2016). Still apps receive a lesser degree of attention, also due to the relative shallowness of most game apps. They do provide fun and also show violence, blood / gore and nudity amongst others. But where modern PC games come on Blu-Ray's with up to 50GB of data, blown up to huge screens and monitors, game apps consist of 500MB or much less in most cases. This means that the amount of potentially harming characters, levels, enemies, situations and events could be much lower. This is not rendering game apps to be unproblematic, but makes it understandable why game apps and physical gaming products can be treated differently.

Therefore, unlike USK, ESRA up to now did not join IARC or any other online classification system (reasons see below) but simply altered their rating behavior according to the nature of the type of game.

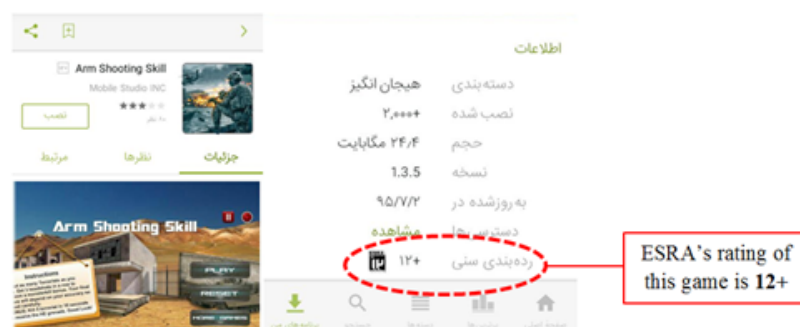


Figure 17: Display of ESRA's age rating symbol for the app "Arm shooting skill" on Cafe Bazaar (App Store)

### 3.3 IARC

Existing systems like USK or ESRA rate any game on an individual basis making the efforts portrayed so far. This means that any game needs to be sent to the testers (gamers in ESRA) which then review the game, prepare documents, excerpts from the game, videos and so on and aid the rating commissions. During the past decades this method was worthwhile, forthcoming games were previously announced and advertised, making it possible to actually prepare the public and pave the way for the final launch of a product.

In times of the internet this has become difficult. Hundreds, if not thousands of apps and games and tools, some even with game elements, get released per day on various platforms and

through different channels worldwide. People of all ages can purchase and download almost any content – anywhere and from everywhere.

It seems unlikely that any national age rating system could review and grade every such app – if developers would inform them at all.

These challenges were identified and addressed by several independent rating agencies and in 2013 IARC, the “International Age Rating Coalition” was founded (IARC Webpage). It features a novel approach in that it allows developers to evaluate their games themselves, using an online portal that guides developers through a process to correctly identify problematic content in their games.

IARC is a non-profit organization, registered according to US law. All of its members (currently PEGI, USK, ClassInd, the Australian age rating board, ESRB) have equal rights. At the moment IARC is led by the ESRB with USK as the deputy. IARC is located at ESRB’s facilities in New York. The funding is used to cover central costs or to support testing / rating measures in various countries.

### **3.3.1 The rating process**

Registered developers, who for instance want to upload their content to an online store like Google Play, need to go through a content rating process there. The portal confronts developers with various questions and provides videos and tutorials as helping measures. For example, if a developer is unsure about the level of violence in his game, he can watch videos with violent content and estimate what applies to his or her game most. The questionnaire provided by IARC can only be accessed by registered developers who are about to upload a game.

The process starts with the selection of the category the application would fit in. The categories are:

- Reference, News, or Educational (information and news applications)
- Social Networking Forums and UGC Sharing (helps users to share content)
- Consumer Store or Commercial Streaming Service (selling physical goods)
- Game (game applications)
- Entertainment (apps with an entertainment approach like magazines, sex tips etc.)
- Utility, Productivity, Communication, or other (tools, productivity apps etc.)

Once confirmed that the application is indeed a game the rating process starts by leading the developer through a predefined set of questions assorted in the following categories:

- Violence
- Fear
- Sexuality
- Gambling
- Language
- Controlled Substance
- Crude Humor
- Miscellaneous

First the system asks basic questions as to whether for example any form of violence appears in the game. These can be answered either with “Yes” or “No”. The denial opens no further dialogue, while choosing “Yes” in the Violence section opens a number of sub-questions, again divided into two main categories “Violence against Humans” and “Violence against Non-Humans”. Here the rating system asks for example if the game is set in a childlike, fantastical or realistic setting and whether the developer would describe the portrayal of violence as unrealistic or realistic. Other entries ask for the level of blood / gore that is associated with this violence or if “innocent or defenseless characters can be seriously injured or killed” or if the player may become rewarded or “otherwise stimulated to use the most aggressive, cruel or bloody violent acts available”.

If the developer is unsure about which of the preset answers to choose he can open an informational pop-up window by clicking on “Learn more”, a link placed next to most of the questions. This pop-up window then features additional information sometimes including videos.

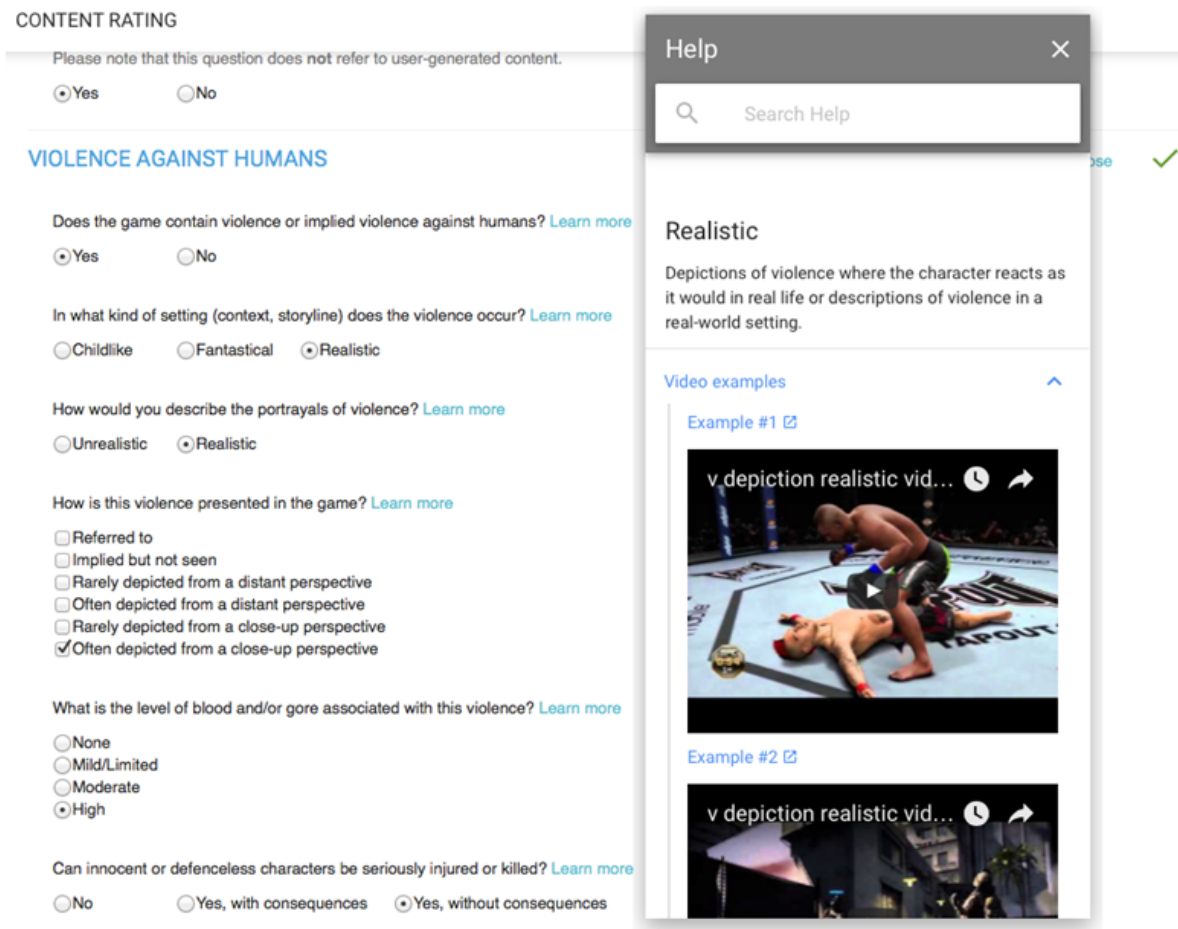


Figure 18: IARC's age rating questionnaire as displayed in Google's Developer Console

Similar questions apply to “Violence against Non-Humans”. Notable changes here are questions regarding real-world-animals or whether these animals behave or respond like humans. Also, there is a question about “innocent characters”. IARC has made sure of providing varieties in videos – they show what each category means and give examples. This shows a good attention to detail.

“Fear” asks about the frequency of the display of scary or horrifying elements and of course whether pictures or sounds could be likely to scare somebody.

“Sexuality” opens a multitude of sub-questions about inferences of or references to sexuality, sexual activities itself and again regarding the frequency of and duration of scenes with visual sexual content. Here the developer is also asked whether he or she would consider the content to be suggestive or if characters younger than 18 are shown, if frontal nudity is being depicted (or certain body parts like breasts) and if any provocative outfits are shown and in which frequency. Again, the setting is deemed to be important, whether it is natural or scientific.

“Gambling” means gambling that is carried out in casinos or may inspire to gamble by teaching how to play cards.

“Language” wants to know if any language used in the game may potentially be received as offensive or if there is any discriminatory language used against races, religions, sexes.

“Controlled Substance” asks about references to the use of drugs, alcohol or tobacco, whether illegal use is shown or propagated or if frequent use is being glorified.

“Crude Humour” requests information regarding the use and audio-visual display of bodily functions such as belching, vomiting and other acts of human defecation.








“Miscellaneous” is more oriented towards user interactivity in that this section wants to know whether any user-provided personal information and / or physical location is being shared with others, if symbols related to racist propaganda get shown, if the game contains any detailed descriptions “of techniques that could be used in criminal offences” and finally whether the game “advocates committing acts of terrorism”.

Finally, developers can save all their entries and then see a new button appearing “Calculate rating”. Then the portal computes the appropriate age rating symbol according to the legal situation in various countries.

A summary of the developer’s entries and finally the results of the calculated rating according to various regions of the world including the appropriate symbol and the descriptors leading to this regional rating is shown.



**CALCULATED RATING** [Learn more](#)

Rating System	Rating Category	Descriptors
<b>Australian Classification Board (ACB)</b> Australia		Your app has been refused classification by this rating authority. This may impact your ability to distribute your app to some territories.
<b>Classificação Indicativa (ClassInd)</b> Brazil	 Rated 18+	Extreme violence Explicit sex Drugs
<b>Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB)</b> North America	 Adults only 18+	Sexual violence Blood and gore Strong sexual content Nudity Use of drugs and alcohol Strong language Crude humour
<b>Pan-European Game Information (PEGI)</b> Europe	 PEGI 18	Extreme violence Sex Sexual violence Drugs Strong language Gambling Criminal technique instructions
<b>Unterhaltungssoftware Selbstkontrolle (USK)</b> Germany	 USK, Ages 18+	Sexual violence Explicit violence Sex/eroticism Drug use Alcohol use Tobacco use Shock and/or horror content Explicit language
<b>IARC Generic</b> Rest of world	 Rated for 18+	Extreme violence Sex Sexual violence Drugs Strong language Gambling Criminal technique instructions
<b>Google Play</b> South Korea  A game unsuitable for minors younger than 18 may be removed from Google Play in Korea unless pre-rated by GRAC. Please see <a href="#">here</a> for more detail.	 Rated for 17+	Extreme violence Sex Sexual violence Drugs Strong language Gambling Criminal technique instructions

**Interactive elements:** Users interact, Shares info, Shares location, Digital purchases

*Figure 19: Final result page of IARC's calculation process*

Then, the created age rating category will subsequently be added to any game content that is uploaded to app stores like Google Play or Firefox Marketplace, which means that users not only can read the content description and download the game, but can also see the age rating that was given to this game title.

Also, certain regional factors such as games unsuitable for minors younger than 18 in South Korea, get mentioned. Here reference is given for developers to find useful information regarding the pre-rating procedure in Korea regarding the “Game Industry Promotion Act”.

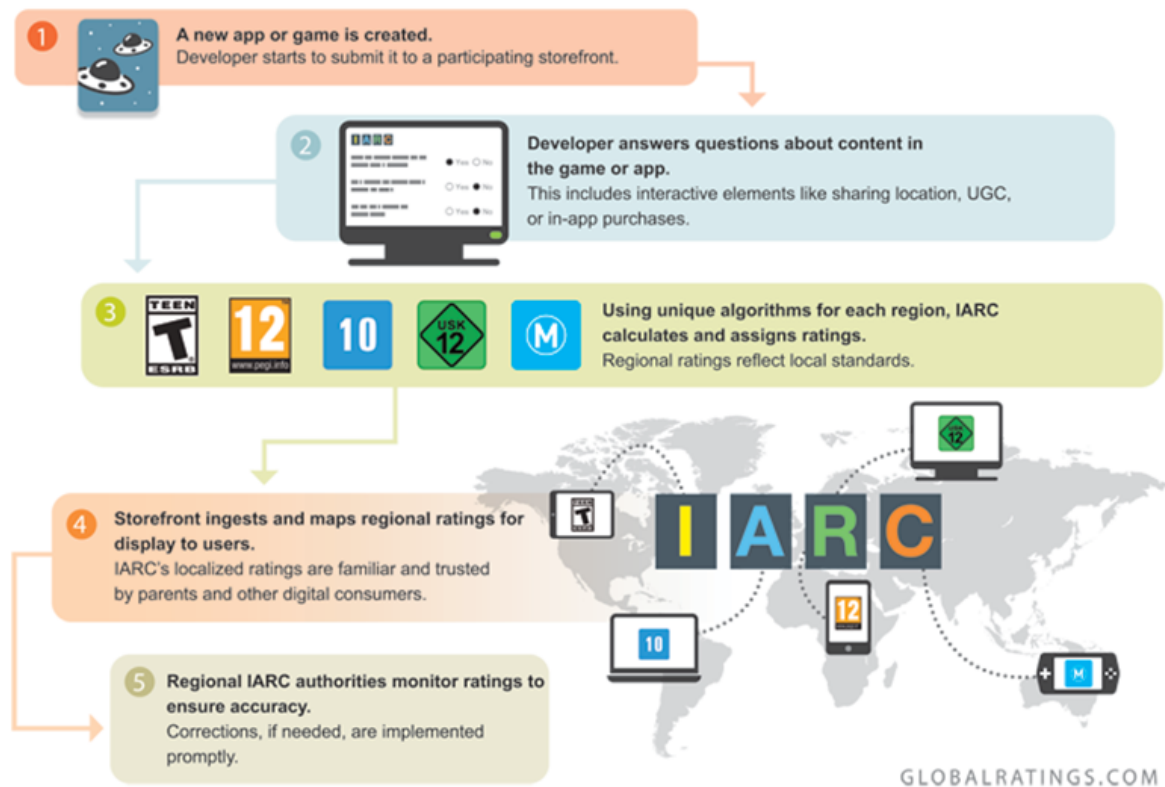


Figure 20: IARC's age rating process<sup>5</sup>

### 3.3.2 Evaluation of IARC's online rating system

Developers from all over the world, coming from different social, societal and cultural traditions work with one system to rate their games for a launch in many different territories all over the world – how realistic is it that each individual rating complies to the standards that were set for boxed and physical games?

Due to the multitude of questions, the overall rating tends to be realistic and developers take it seriously (Falk 2015, 79), also users can complain against a provided rating symbol and developers have little interest in customers complaining about their content. In rare cases existing rating agencies like USK could change the rating and notify the developer or finally change the rating without any further notification in case a developers refuses to accept the external decision (ibid., 78). According to USK, a 12 month testing period was conducted in 2013 which showed that results from online rating were comparable to offline rating procedures. In Australia and Brasil IARC has reached legal status as a measure usable for youth protection.

5 <https://www.globalratings.com/how-iarc-works.aspx>, 18.9.2016

Since for example in Germany the current system is legally grounded and experts from various fields rate individual games, it seems a bit like giving away security letting developers grade their own productions. Distribution channels in Germany have to obey USKs ratings. On the other hand, the sheer massive amount of games constantly released does indeed render a direct control almost impossible. In a legal survey German lawyers have evaluated the legitimacy of the IARC system in relation to German youth protection laws and have come to the conclusion that although the IARC rating is not the result of an age rating process according to §14 JuSchG (Hilgert / Sümmermann 2015, 546), survey of age rating decisions of IARC and USK show that the results of self-classifying questionnaires prepared by developers are indeed comparable with commission based decisions of USK. A “matrix commission” at USK and other national IARC-partners surveys the ongoing classification processes and discusses the impact of decisions leading to certain ratings also for other games and apps (Falk 2015, p. 78).

In addition to first the self-regulatory questionnaire and second the matrix commission the “Rating Authority Working Group” is the final group on an international level that discusses possible developments and necessary changes with a wider international scope and possible impact on national systems. This lets Hilgert and Sümmermann come to the conclusion that in the end, and because the German authorities and youth protection laws are involved with the design and control of the IARC system and can also suggest corrections to the system through USK, content providers can finally trust in the age rating symbols provided by IARC (Hilgert / Sümmermann 2015, 547).

Having all this in mind, IARC’ rating system appears to be swift and easily usable while at the same time being legally grounded although it might seem a bit lightweight at first sight. Furthermore, traditional systems used by ESRA or USK seem not to be able to deal with modern forms of development and distribution of games in the long run – IARC therefore is not meant to replace these, but to evolve the basics of traditional youth protection efforts into the virtual space (Falk 2015, 81).

Several national age rating boards are already cooperating with IARC: the Australian Classification Board of Australia, Classificacao Indicative of Brasil, the Entertainment Software Rating Board of North America, Europe’s Pan European Game Information (PEGI) and Germany’s Unterhaltungssoftware Selbstkontrolle (USK).

Microsoft’s Windows Store, Google Play, Nintendo’s eShop and Firefox Marketplace are cooperating business partners and use IARC in their distribution channels (IARC Webpage). Since they are, from a legal point of view as Hilgert and Sümmermann point out, neither host providers nor content providers, which means they cannot claim distance to the content nor ownership, and yet they have a serious degree of influence on the display of content and appearance of apps (see

also 3.1.1), they can be deemed responsible as publishers of those contents (Hilgert / Sümmermann 2015, 544).

Using filters and childcare settings of operating systems accessing the age-rating classification in online-shops and browsers, parents can restrict access of kids to both contents online in app stores and those on the computer. This can be seen as a major advantage against other and traditional age rating systems that mainly worked during the process of buying a game but lost much of its power after a game left the environment of a shop (ibid., 548).

#### **4 Main differences between “western” and ESRA’s approaches – A Comparison of Selected Game reviews by ESRA and USK**

Given the differences of USK’s and ESRA’s rating systems, how would both compete when it comes to comparing an individual game?

For comparison Bethesda Softwork’s “Fallout 4”, Warner Bros. Entertainment’s “Batman: Arkham City” and Koei Tecmo Europe Ltd.’s “Romance of the Three Kingdoms XIII” were chosen. The final rating reports of these games were requested from USK and ESRA and compared based on their legal backgrounds and guidelines.

Note: The screenshots here show only a part of the report’s final results. The reports themselves are longer and more detailed. Also the following titles were authorized to be rated by ESRA in their original form, without any changes or modifications in the content (as claimed by Reza Ahmadi, General Manager of ESRA).

##### **4.1 Fallout 4**

Fallout 4 is the latest installment in a series of famous role-playing games that started way back in 1990, originally technically being based on the classic franchise “The Bard’s Tale”, published by Electronic Arts in 1985.

The Fallout series tells the story of mankind after a nuclear catastrophe, clearly a subject of interest for any nation and culture today.

Game ratings and user reviews internationally, were outstanding. Now, how well did such an anticipated title, in a German and Iranian rating process?

Both USK and ESRA rated the game “18” – not suitable for children and juveniles under the age of 18.

USK's rating:

<b>JUGENDENTSCHEID</b> classification ruling	
Name des Titels / name of the product	
<b>Fallout 4</b>	
Altersfreigabe entsprechend Jugendschutzbestimmungen / age rating	
<b>keine Jugendfreigabe gemäß § 14 JuSchG</b>	
Antragsteller / applicant	
<b>ZeniMax Germany GmbH</b>	
Registriernummer / number of registration	<b>40263/15</b>
technisches System / technical platform	<b>PC</b>
Sprache der Software / language of the software	<b>englisch</b>
Prüfdatum / date of examination	<b>26.08.2015</b>
Auflagen, Anmerkungen / conditions, note	

Figure 21: USK report on Fallout 4

The report of the decision USK created to justify its rating spreads over six pages. Page 1 is a summary of the game's specifications and the final rating. It features the game title, the name of the distribution company, a registration no., the platform and system language and the date of examination.

Pages 2-3 describe the game, its content and the tasks the player has to carry out. Also the graphics, sounds and the atmosphere of the game are described here.

Page 4, 5 and the upper quarter of page 6 contain the reasons for the decision. USK explains that although the player is able and entitled to kill, this is always a matter of defending himself against others in order to survive. The game is not glorifying killing – the main aim of the game is to survive and sustain long enough in order to successfully build up a new peaceful society. Violence dominates less than half of the game's playing time which is set into a deserted landscape.

Violence is shown in multiple ways – body parts can be torn apart but USK believes that the visualization is not overly realistic. Killing sequences become repetitive throughout the game. This does not make them attractive enough for players who are looking for such drastic imagery. No

element of the game lets players think that violence is harmless or justified in general. Reflection of violence and killings in dialogues see special mentioning.

The game confronts the player with moral implications about violence, therefore players are able to enter a distant view on what they do and see.

Fallout 4 in the eyes of USK does not justify violence or killing as a proper means of finding justice or raising social status. Since communication, interaction with the game’s population and negotiations are important parts of the gameplay, aggressive play alone won’t help players to succeed – unjust violence even gets penalized by the game.

Game levels and actions have no connection to the real world situations juveniles have to deal with. This too helps to lower the fear that the degree of violence shown may have inviting effects.

In their final conclusion USK states that Fallout 4 is a complex game that offers many other strategies than just violence or fighting. Nevertheless the game’s setting and visual appearance are not suitable for kids and juveniles under the age of 18.

ESRA’s rating:

**Game Title: Fall out 4**

<b>Game Information</b>	Platform	PC
	Developer(s)	Bethesda Game Studios
	Release Date	Nov/10/2015
	Source	Edited
	<u>Metacritic</u>	84/100
	ESRA age	+18

Aggregated scores from analyst and gamer:

Required ability for gaming	○●●●●
Fear	○●●●●
Violence	●●●●●
Social Abnormality	○●●●●
Smoking	○●●●●
Disappointments and Hopelessness	○●●●●

*Figure 22: ESRA’s report on Fallout 4*

ESRA enters any game relevant information into its data base. Taking only a list of scenes and situations recorded from Fallout 4 compiles a comprehensive list of 9 pages. The list starts, just like the review of USK, with basic game information including the assigned rating by ESRA.

Then follows a set of scores from game analysts and gamers that is meant to serve as an orientation for families. Between 1-5 status points can be given for

- Required ability for gaming
- Fear
- Violence
- Social Abnormality
- Smoking
- Disappointments and Hopelessness

Then follows a table; called the “Full Report”. Here each problematic scene or sequence identified by the analysts gets mentioned with the appropriate time codes leading to the exact spot in the recorded sequence.

Events get described in 5 categories: Main content, Sub Content 1, Sub Content 2, Intensity and “Other Contents or Explanation”.

The descriptions also put attention on details of the game’s technical structure. The choice of dresses and clothes the player can choose from for his character in the main menu is considered to be “Explicit” due to the nature of some of the barely covering rags, the mentioning of the word “Sex” as an indicator for gender in the main menu receives mentioning, but the reviewer added a note that here the gender of the characters to be selected is meant.

Unlike USK that only focused on gameplay aspects, ESRA mentions visual violence, blood and explicit clothing (in any part of the game, be it in a picture on a cover of a magazine or the clothes of one of the main characters). Language, fear and drinking alcohol are other factors that are observed and described briefly.

The list makes the strong focus on sexuality obvious – words, clothing, actions etc. are deemed to have sexual background and are considered as such. It is apparent that ESRA’s gamers and analysts must take a lot of time to first record the gameplay and then closely inspect the recording plus exactly describing what they see. The time codes to mark the location of the content range up to 24.11.19 (hours / minutes / seconds) – which means more than a day of playing and recording one game!

## 4.2 Batman: Arkham City

This installment of the Batman-franchise is an Action-Adventure that puts Batman in fights against Hugo Strange, a mad scientist and also his arch-enemy “The Joker”.

USK’s rating:

<b>JUGENDENTSCHEID</b> classification ruling	
Name des Titels / name of the product	<b>Batman Arkham City</b>
Altersfreigabe entsprechend Jugendschutzbestimmungen / age rating	<b>Freigegeben ab 16 Jahren gemäß § 14 JuSchG</b>
Antragsteller / applicant	<b>Warner Bros. Entertainment</b>
Registriernummer / number of registration	<b>31197/11</b>
technisches System / technical platform	<b>Sony-Playstation 3</b>
Sprache der Software / language of the software	<b>englisch</b>
Prüfdatum / date of examination	<b>04.08.2011</b>
Auflagen, Anmerkungen / conditions, note	

*Figure 23: USK’s report on Batman: Arkham City*

Players will be confronted with fierce fights, smashed bones and face kicks in the game and will also see skeletons and humans being burned beyond recognition. Psychopathic adversaries and dark settings may create a fearful atmosphere, but USK’s age rating commission came to the conclusion that players from the age of 16 on are used to the comic scenario and are aware of the game’s resemblance to fictional characters and settings from the comic books of the same name.

Here USK’s report shows the strength of rating commissions. Since the game requires cognitive skills and strategies and because there is no blood and the player cannot kill somebody, a minority of voters in the commission was of the opinion that the game could also be played by 12 year olds. Since the majority was of a different opinion the final rating became 16.



ESRA's rating:

**Game Title: Batman: Arkham City**

<b>Game Information</b>	Platform	PC
	Developer(s)	October 18, 2011
	Release Date	Nov/10/2015
	Source	Edited
	<u>Metacritic</u>	91/100
	ESRA age	+18

Aggregated scores from analyst and gamer:

Required ability for gaming	●●●●●
Fear	○○○○●
Violence	●●●●●
Social Abnormality	○○○○●
Smoking	○○○○●
Disappointments and Hopelessness	○○○○●

Figure 24: ESRA's report on Batman: Arkham City

The testers of ESRA created a list of problematic content and noted scenes which show gambling or the use of sexual / explicit clothing and language. The list of problematic content mentioned religious references and the display and use of alcoholic drinks. The final result of the rating process is 18+.

4.3 Romance of the Three Kingdoms XIII

This game is a military strategy game that is set in ancient China. Players move units and troops from a bird's-eye-perspective and can zoom in and out of the battlefield.

USK's rating:

<b>JUGENDENTSCHEID</b> classification ruling	
Name des Titels / name of the product	
<b>Romance Of The Three Kingdoms XIII</b>	
Altersfreigabe entsprechend Jugendschutzbestimmungen / age rating	
<b>Freigegeben ab 12 Jahren gemäß § 14 JuSchG</b>	
Antragsteller / applicant	
<b>KOEI TECMO EUROPE LTD</b>	
Registriernummer / number of registration	41278/16
technisches System / technical platform	Sony-Playstation 4
Sprache der Software / language of the software	englisch/japanisch
Prüfdatum / date of examination	21.04.2016
Auflagen, Anmerkungen / conditions, note	

Figure 25: USK's report on Romance of the Three Kingdoms XIII

The rating commission found this game to be a very complex strategic simulation that also incorporates economical decisions since cities need to be build and maintained, resources need to be secured to support the armies and even diplomatic communication needs to be carried out. Nevertheless the main focus is on war and how to become the strongest and most successful warlord in the game.

The rating commission does not see the danger of the glorification of war. The setting in ancient China is too distant to modern game players. Also, since it is no action game but a strategic simulation, players need time to think about their strategies very much like in classic Chess.

Therefore they decided for a rating of 12.

ESRA’s rating:

<b>Game Information</b>	Platform	PC
	Developer(s)	Koei
	Release Date	July 8, 2016
	Source	Edited
	<u>Metacritic</u>	
	ESRA age	+12

Aggregated scores from analyst and gamer:

Required ability for gaming	●●●●●
Fear	○○○○●
Violence	○○○○●
Social Abnormality	●●●●●
Smoking	○○○○○
Disappointments and Hopelessness	○○○○●

*Figure 26: ESRA’s report on Romance of the Three Kingdoms XIII*

ESRA rates various scenes as problematic- scenes where the use of alcohol is being displayed or sexually explicit clothing is shown. In fact, contents being sexually stimulating and the use of alcohol dominate the list of incidents. Only the starting sequences (and again one destructive scene at 06:02:01) of the game seem to have caught the analysts’ attention as there they recognized violence in combats and visible destruction (according to Morteza Bigdeli they were too repetitive and seemed the same, comment Oct. 10th, 2016). The overall rating is 12.

4.4 Summary

It is hardly possible to fully work out the differences and similarities of USK’s and ESRA’s rating systems. The ratings surveyed so far are surprisingly often similar in the results, not in the rating

process. While Violence and the glorification of it is *the* topic for USK, sexual content as well as drugs (alcohol etc.) is for ESRA. When it comes to content that could be deemed as sexually stimulating ESRA has a tendency to go for the highest rating possible. If such content will be edited, “ESRA goes with violence and glory as the priority” (comment Morteza Bigdeli, Oct. 10th, 2016). The commission reports of USK on the other hand, show not only the result but also make it possible to follow the arguments of the commission and even make the differences in opinions amongst the testers visible. This lets USK’s method appear to be a breathing system, being able to react to subtle content and changes in the opinions and likes of the public while ESRA is following a rather static system that needs to max out a rating symbol once certain content was identified (something that also applies to IARC).

## 5 Conclusion

Again it needs to be stressed that rating physical games (on CD-ROM for example) and game apps are different processes, in Germany and Iran both are conducted similarly: by dedicated rating commissions in Germany for physical games and through IARC for virtual goods / downloadable game content / game apps, and in Iran by analysts who extract contents and then decide on a rating in a meeting with ESRA’s manager – the decision of whom should pass the approval of the game classification council. In Iran, game apps are treated differently in that they receive less attention and are not fully played through, other than that the procedure is identical to the one carried out on physical games.

In general it is surprising how close the ESRA and IARC systems are to each other. Both work based on preset categories that any game that is to be rated will be related and compared to. Both define and describe areas of problematic content that a game is then matched with. Similar to USK the final rating will not be calculated by ESRA but decided upon in an internal discussion.

The categories of evaluation are also similar, though much more detailed in ESRA’s system due to the cultural necessities of an Islamic country, its rules and catalog of forbidden practices and conventions at the heart of the legislative.

All systems have their own benefits and flaws though. While at USK each game gets prepared and rated by human specialists and the rating procedure is being carried out by commissions resulting in a written report that is then sent to the developer or publishing company, the rating process at IARC follows preset rules and seems to be the least flexible among the other two while ESRA tries to combine both worlds as the analysts do make individual decisions as to what rating would be suitable and then their decision is again reviewed and discussed in a session

with the ESRA manager, the manager of the analyzing department, the expert who analyzed the game and the gamer who played the game. So there is flexibility in ESRA too but what makes ESRA more rigid is the strong emphasis on the Islamic rulings which are not debatable, therefore the existence of certain content automatically calls for a certain rating. In case of ESRA the rules are stricter and there is more to consider when rating games and this alone makes the rating process a more sensitive one and at times editing necessary. Since a commission discusses possible ratings at USK, ratings can individually adapt to content as well as cultural or political factors that may grant a rating of 18 but through the commission’s discretion may receive a lower rating. On the other hand, USK’s strengths make it a slow system, too slow for today’s rapidly expanding software markets.

Further similarities and differences could be identified by doing a large scale survey and putting more game ratings from various sources into contrast, which goes beyond the boundaries of this article.

IARC is the least flexible age rating system in terms of decisions. If rules need to be changed this first is a matter of the national boards and finally one of the “Rating Authority Working Group”. IARC’s questionnaire, as detailed, innovative and easy to understand as it is, can only feature a limited number of possible answers. Also, in the background of the technical depths of the system it’s obviously a small number of “do’s” and “don’ts” that heavily influences a rating, similar to the “*maximum method*” carried out by ESRA (see 3.2.3) – the following example shows this:

**QUESTIONNAIRE SUMMARY**

**MISCELLANEOUS**

- Contains Nazi symbols, references or propaganda

**CALCULATED RATING** [Learn more](#)

Rating System	Rating Category	Descriptors
Australian Classification Board (ACB) Australia	G	General
Classificação Indicativa (ClassInd) Brazil	L	All ages
Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) North America	E	Everyone
Pan-European Game Information (PEGI) Europe	3	PEGI 3
Unterhaltungssoftware Selbstkontrolle (USK) Germany	18	USK: Ages 18+
IARC Generic Rest of world	3+	Rated for 3+
Google Play South Korea	3	Rated for 3+

Figure 27: Showing the “maximum method” in IARC’s system

Here all the questions were answered with a “no”; this sample game includes no violence, no drugs, no offending language, no sex and no other sensitive content except propaganda or political symbols of the Nazi era in Germany. While other parts of the world would have little or no problems with this game, in Germany it would be only available for adults according to the rating of IARC. It must be assumed that a human commission at USK would take other factors into account and that it may assign a different rating depending on whether a game uses propaganda material or symbols for the means of propaganda or if it’s a simulation or serious game true to historic events down to the details.

IARC says that developers and customers have the ability to react and complain against ratings that seem to be wrong in their eyes. In reality this must be put into question. With regard to the multitude of games being released every day it is most unlikely that any problematic content or wrongly received age rating symbol may be recognized. Also apps are easier to access for children and most of the time since the apps are downloaded by the player itself the parents will not have a chance to even know what games their children are playing so how can they be aware of the bad contents and whether the rating is right or not to complain about it so that IARC can change the rating? Also, physical games are played on PC or consoles which have huge screens in comparison to mobile devices, which makes the monitoring easier for parents. For these reasons it might be even more important to have a more proper game app rating. Although another question is how much children even care about such ratings when downloading apps and wouldn’t an 18+ rating seem more interesting to younger children? Since in buying apps there is no way of knowing the age of the player, the apps are open to download for all (this is in itself a topic worth of discussion although such discussion is beyond the scope of this article).

Here, the man driven procedure at ESRA has the advantage that although it is bound to fixed rules and categories which are based on Islamic scriptures, still it is humans who survey each game and do a rating. In that, first gamers and narrators watch and extract game contents that is then matched with ESRA’s guidelines by the analyst who prepares the rating which is finally discussed with ESRA’s manager. The democratic disadvantage is that it is finally ESRA’s manager who accepts or rejects a decision. There is no rating being based on individual votes like USK’s (and their rating commissions and the imminent debate on pro’s and con’s).

Two other flaws are apparent: Due to the strict Islamic rules human reviewers at ESRA may seem to be more careful than they might have to be – but this is a rather western perspective. According to an Islamic point of view they are simply objecting and deciding the way they are supposed to so. Secondly, it is hardly imaginable how ESRA can keep up this system while at the same time also maintain a degree of quality in their decisions, given the ever expanding flood of games being developed and released. A problem USK was faced with and therefore helped to set up IARC.

IARC and ESRA both follow preset structures. But ESRA follows a more detailed restrictive structure since the harmful contents according to ESRA are more, and more vitally important to the culture into which the games are to be released, so for instance there is only one gambling option in IARC but ESRA has defined 3 different types of gambling and one type, which is the real gambling, is banned, making the release of a game difficult if the gambling content cannot be edited and if it is a dominant part of the game! If a scene can be changed or removed then the game will be rated. Also ESRA and Iran cannot risk it to not have played the games fully themselves because if there is a nudity scene it is way out of the norms of Iran and not acceptable at all.

How transparent is the system? and would external reactions be considered? ESRA says that their system was set up because parents wanted guidance. ESRA provides this guidance and as all human decisions it might be wrong at times, but there is no appeal process to report this. Since games are rated by ESRA prior to their release, ESRA is in fact negotiating with developers. But it is not known whether and how possible post release reactions are or can be considered. ESRA says that no customer, parents, developers or publisher ever complained about their ratings (comment by Morteza Bigdeli, Oct 10th, 2016). This can be a sign of acceptance. On the other hand, if a customer wants a lower rating would he complain about the degree of violence, use of drugs or sex in a game in an Islamic country? If just the sexual tone of language leads to a high age rating, would developers or players really complain against a rating that was received as unjustified?

Germany's USK and Iran's ESRA system were both established to rate physical games first and are now facing the necessity to evolve due to the online and streaming possibilities of the future that let methods of traditional distribution appear as matters of the past. In the future games will less and less be purchased on physical media in traditional stores. The future of digital content distribution lies online. The question might be justified if age rating does make any sense in the online era at all – since apps are open to download by the gamers regardless of their age even without the knowledge of their parents. Then again it must be underlined that age rating is not only a measure to make certain content available to certain age groups. It also marks areas of public do's and don'ts and thus has a meaning beyond the display of any age rating symbols alone. App stores and online platforms that make use of the IARC system also provide a security functionality for parents who can adjust the settings of their operating system in a way that without their permission no inappropriate content can be downloaded. Otherwise, somebody who is downloading inappropriate content *knows* that he is doing so. Next to this a working age rating system is also a sign of a legislative that cares and shows responsibility.

While USK has already set sails to ride the digital waves of age rating, Iran is still cruising alone short off the harbour, despite the fact that Iran's government set a "national Plan for Computer Games" in power, drafted by the countries High Council for Cyberspace and endorsed by President Rohani in 2015 (IRCG Facts Book 2016, 11).

Iran's ESRA efforts are up to now met with skepticism and resistance by leading members of international age rating communities like IARC (Interview at USK, Aug. 31st 2016). A common argument is that ESRA is being based on moral and religious rules and aspects which are supposed to be difficult to make compatible to a secular global (western) system. This point seems to be of limited plausibility however. Since both IARC and ESRA are based on preset rules it seems to be easy from a technical point of view to embed ESRA into this system. It just appears that probably most of the games will appear to be banned in / for Iran based on these preset rules if nobody is able to make a judgement in person. Also, the system would need to reflect on edited versions (for the Iranian market) and non-edited versions. And it seems to also be a quite complex task to convert all of ESRA's rating principles into a format compatible to IARC and still keep it maintainable for both the technicians at IARC and also the developers. But this seems to be a discussion not more complex than others IARC has led with various national groups so far.

So far these were always theoretical questions since IARC was not able to work with ESRA due to political reasons (comment by Morteza Bigdeli, Oct. 10th, 2016). IARC is connected to ESRB, the North-American age rating system, located at their offices in New York. Then again ESRB immediately refused to be in contact with ESRA just when ESRA was established (Caiolli 2008) by stating it has no links or anything to ESRA in a press release. It is uncertain whether it is correct that, as the press release indicated, ESRA had asserted established links to ESRB which didn't exist or if other reasons played a role. Nevertheless, ESRA still isn't linked to any other national or international age rating system.

So should there be a "Western" and an "Islamic" age rating system acting next to each other on a global scale? Both addressing similar or in large the same populations and rate the same games? From an intercultural and global point of view having two systems establishing their own age rating agencies cannot be considered to be a desirable solution. Especially not since IARC's introductory video on the front page of their website states that the ability of this system to adapt to many regional cultural preferences is considered to be one of their main assets.

Alas, at a closer look nevertheless it is hard to see how the only age rating system both in the Middle East and also in the Islamic world can be kept out in the long run – and why it should be. 81 million Iranians form an interesting market, but due to the non-existence of any copyrights, business opportunities are wary at best. Once Iran enters international copyright agreements, ESRA will receive an even higher meaning as official game exports will soon start to flood the country.

Western age rating systems might be secular, but their roots are surely not. What people in the west understand of violence or moral decisions stems from Christian Holy Scriptures just as the whole tradition of public life does. And, as a side-note, conservative Christians and Evangelicals could possibly find themselves in much better company with ESRA's guidelines than with IARC's!

Adding an Islamic age rating system to IARC may make adaptations necessary – on both sides. But the efforts and communication processes fueled by this attempt appear to be worthwhile.

It is difficult to see and accept that 1.1 billion Muslims worldwide should not have their say or Muslim parents not be able to make a choice on games based on what they understand and expect of youth protection. From a political point of view it should be recognized and acknowledged that Iran, a country that knows no age rating for movies, did a bold step forward to establish an independent rating system for games and online content. Starting negotiations can be a learning process for all sides.

Last but not least, which suggestions seem to be appropriate to make ESRA more flexible and transparent to the Iranian public according to the needs and desires of the strong online society Iran has become?

Parents and any other interested parties should be able to make an enquiry to ESRA about certain games or content witnessed online or offline. This can be organized through ESRA's website or by filing a request through any online portals just like IARC is offering this possibility. In fact, ESRA claims to have added such an option to its website which will be online soon (comment by Morteza Bigdeli, Oct. 10th, 2016).

A discussion forum on ESRA's website, preferably in different languages (English is planned according to Morteza Bigdeli, Oct. 10th, 2016), could both give individuals the opportunity to discuss age rating related questions and also add new impulses and provide useful hints and info to ESRA.

An appeal procedure for the public or for game companies could also add interesting input to the process and would make the system more "breathing" and reflect public discourses.

Finally, a "parent's advisory" board could be set up with interested parents or even juveniles and kids to be able to meet and observe and influence certain age rating processes.

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## Interviews

- 26th of July, IRCG HQ Tehran: Reza Ahmadi (President of ESRA), Mehrdad Ashtiani (Head of International Relations of IRCG), Setareh Malekpour, Stefan Piasecki
- August 18th, Gamescom Cologne: Mehrdad Ashtiani, Hasan Karimi Ghodoosi (CEO IRCG)
- August 31st, USK HQ Berlin: Felix Falk (CEO USK)

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