

Ratings Process

ESRB uses two different rating processes depending on whether a game is available physically (e.g., boxed) or only digitally.

Physical Games

Physical games sold at retail are reviewed prior to release, with two key forms of content disclosure provided by the publisher:

1. A completed questionnaire detailing any relevant content (violence, sex, language, gambling, etc.), and other factors such as context, reward systems and player control.
 2. A video showing typical gameplay, missions, and cutscenes, including the most “extreme” content.
- Unplayable content (i.e., “locked out”), if it is pertinent to a rating, must also be disclosed.

The video is reviewed by at least three trained raters, who recommend a Rating Category, Content Descriptors, and Interactive Elements. The raters’ recommendation is then evaluated and confirmed, sometimes following a parity review to maintain consistency across rating assignments with similar content. A Rating Summary is then finalized, detailing the factors that led to a game’s rating. Finally, the rating is issued to the publisher, which either accepts it as the final rating or chooses to revise the game’s content and resubmit it, at which point the rating process starts again.

After release, testers may also play-test the game to verify that the content disclosure was complete.

Digital Games

Digital games are rated using a process developed by the [International Age Rating Coalition \(IARC\)](#).

Prior to release developers fill out a questionnaire that quickly assigns the game or app’s Rating Category, Content Descriptors, and Interactive Elements. Games and apps rated via the IARC process do not have Rating Summaries.

The IARC system enables us to monitor rating assignments, test product upon release to ensure those ratings were properly assigned, and promptly adjust the ratings when necessary.

Downloadable Content (DLC)

In most cases, the rating assigned to a game also applies to its DLC. However, if the DLC content exceeds the rating assigned to the “core” product, it must be submitted, and a different rating may be assigned to the DLC.

Enforcement

We have several mechanisms in place to ensure that publishers fully disclose all the content in their games, so consumers get complete and reliable rating information.

For digitally delivered games and apps rated through [IARC](#), we can promptly correct the display of an inaccurate rating assignment, which serves as an effective enforcement mechanism.

The display of rating information on physical games is far more difficult to modify after a game ships. As a result, our enforcement system includes sanctions and fines (up to \$1 million) that may be imposed on publishers who don’t fully disclose content to us during the rating process.

Our Advertising Review Council (ARC) also works with publishers to ensure that correct and complete rating information is displayed on game packaging and marketing materials. Publishers of physical games rated by the ESRB are contractually obligated to follow industry-adopted [Principles and Guidelines for Responsible Advertising Practices](#). The [ESRB Website Council](#) (EWC) members also voluntarily comply with many of those guidelines.