

## **Towards a Positive Assessment Policy for Computer and Console Games**

Herbert Rosenstingl & Michael Wagner

*The emergence of new media tends to trigger moral panics, quite often leading to overreactions within political systems. Such an overreaction can currently be observed in some European countries in connection with a legal ban of violent video games. In contrast to these countries, Austrian youth policy makers have decided to follow a path of positive assessment for computer and console games rather than rigid legislative regulations. In implementing this strategy, two research studies were carried out. The first discussed scenarios for a public authority providing information on quality computer and console games. The second study analysed the acceptance of a quality seal for games. In this paper we discuss these studies. In addition, we outline continuing research carried out to improve and refine the process of assessment as well as the information and communication process between the authorities and the parents, children and youngsters.*

*Keywords: action, computer games, console games, media pedagogy, protection of minors, youth policy*

The dramatic rise in popularity of digital games in the form of computer or console games challenges policy makers worldwide. The key issue is to develop and implement strategies for protecting children from problematic content while supporting the positive potential of computer games and digital media in general. Many countries have decided to approach the subject purely from a legislative perspective based on a negative assessment policy, e.g. by regulating the distribution of digital games

based on rigid rating systems. In a time where everybody has access to digital distribution channels outside governmental control, however, such strategies appear to be counterproductive. They tend to motivate children to bypass the legal system thereby fostering an environment in which certain forms of digital crime become socially accepted.

Policy makers are quite often influenced by so called “moral panics”, a phenomenon first discussed by Stanley Cohen in connection with an analysis of media coverage on rockers and mods (1972). A moral panic is usually triggered by news reports on one criminal incident that is perceived to be an example of an emerging pattern of deviant behaviour even if no such pattern exists. In a process called deviance amplification continued media coverage then creates a hype phenomenon which can ultimately even cause mass hysteria. It is known that new forms of media technologies are particularly vulnerable to moral panics due to their often perceived potential to negatively influence the youth. It is therefore not particularly surprising that computer games have triggered a number of moral panics and continue to do so, especially in connection with in-game violence.

For policy makers it is generally the easier route to give in to the often simplified demands surfacing during moral panics. It seems increasingly noticeable that some countries have chosen to follow a more challenging path in dealing with the public perception of computer and console games. In this paper we want to describe a process taken by Austrian officials that ultimately led to the creation of a public authority monitoring a positive assessment policy and furthermore trying to educate the public about advantages as well as disadvantages of computer and console game usage.

### **Possible Strategies and Assumed Side-Effects**

In 1994 the department for youth policy of the responsible Federal Ministry had summoned experts and practitioners to a meeting on the topic of “Youth and Computers”. Regarding the aspect of digital games – that had become quite popular especially among young people by this time – there was a common sense about the necessity of measures to be taken by the authorities. The main reason for any call for action was the supposedly harmful content of some games. The ban of *Wolfenstein 3D*

in Germany in January 1994 had provoked a first wave of mass media coverage on violent games.

The experts discussed the concept of USK, a voluntary self rating board of the entertainment software industry in Germany, in comparison to other strategies. As games were only one of several topics within the subject of the meeting, no final conclusion was drawn, but a clear recommendation was made for white lists and counselling of parents and pedagogues instead of purely legislative steps and age rating. The arguments of the experts and practitioners of this meeting on the different strategies were these:

**1. Limitation of access or general ban of violent games.**

This is the concept of the German “index of youth endangering media”. Media products listed on this index are not to be sold to people below the age of 18 and any means of advertising, including the display on a public accessible shelf in the shop, are prohibited.

*Potential:* With no regard of actual harm all suspicious games are simply to be kept out of the reach of youngsters.

*Shortcomings:* It is easy for minors to circumvent this regulation in many different ways, e. g. downloading hacked versions or access at an older friend's home. Over and above it is to be expected that every banning of a game results in increased attention, especially amongst those minors who are already fascinated by violence.

**2. Limitation of access based on an age rating of games, according to a suspected impairment of the development of minors.**

This is the concept of the USK in Germany or other rating boards throughout various countries.

*Potential:* A selective protection that takes the age into account.

*Shortcomings:* Similarly to the above solution, circumvention is possible and an effect of undesirable attention and propaganda might occur. Furthermore these ratings are misunderstood easily, as they do not take into account any other aspects of adequacy. For example, highly complex economic simulations are rated “6”, but no child of this age will be able to play it.

**3. Price increase for violent games through special taxes.**

*Potential:* Following the costs-by-cause principle, a potential social damage has to be paid by the originator.

*Shortcomings:* As the experience in other fields (such as cigarettes or alcohol) demonstrates, any moderate increase has only very limited effect and a noticeable, effective increase is hard to argue conclusively.

**4. Recommendation of games according to the results of positive assessment.**

*Potential:* As a measure of consumer information this provides substantial support on purchase decisions with possible long-term effects on the market and no undesirable propaganda.

*Shortcomings:* It is no measure of protection and in this regard only effective if youngsters either accept or follow these recommendations themselves or possess enough competence for framing their gaming behaviour accordingly.

**5. Fostering the media competence of youngsters, parents and pedagogues.**

*Potential:* this approach unfolds effects in all areas of media usage and is independent of any specific media products.

*Shortcomings:* Critics will always find specific content that remains unanswered by the authorities. But most crucially it seems impossible to reach all people; especially those with the least competence and therefore the greatest need of support are usually most “resistant” to according offers.

The Austrian government subsequently decided to focus on the positive assessment and fostering strategy and systematically pursue those further. Instead of passing rigid laws to black-list specific games, it started to fund initiatives maintaining “white lists” of recommended games. The team in charge initially had to evaluate whether the development of an institutional “quality seal” would be feasible for the small Austrian game market. For this purpose, a feasibility study, carried out by Jürgen Maaß (2003), was commissioned. This feasibility study was based on a series of expert interviews with representatives of publishers as well as vendors and

described various possible scenarios for the organisational and structural implementation of the proposed strategy.

### **Study 1: Feasibility**

The key objectives of the study were defined as

1. describing the industry's and retailer's attitudes and potential acceptance towards an official authority for the positive assessment of computer games, and
2. outlining a scenario of fundamental structures and processes of operating such an agency.

The contacts of the author with executives of several publishers and developers, such as EA, JoWood or Neo/Take2 revealed a very positive response to the suggested strategy (Maaß 2003, 28). However, one issue was raised repeatedly: the Austrian market for computer games is very closely connected with the German (and parts of the Swiss) market and production cues are usually the same for these countries. Therefore, affixing a sticker on the packages of games could not be handled country specific. Moreover, the distribution channels are even more complexly intertwined not only across the countries but also depending on the logistics of the various retailers. “[...] It can be ruled out that a sticker will be applied to those packages sold in Austria specifically”, as Maaß (22) had put it.

The retailers responded very positively as well. They suggested dedicated shelves for those games awarded with the seal of quality (29). It was pointed out that for an agency this solution would be less time critical in comparison to an affixed sticker, as the games could be moved to those shelves at any time given by the assessment procedures (23).

As a result, Maaß (37) suggested defining the objective of an accrediting agency as:

*Games that are recommendable for children and youth, both from the perspective of gaming and pedagogic, based on the assessment of an official evaluation procedure that applies a catalogue of criteria conform to this aim, should be named and featured as such.*

The benchmarks for the success of this strategy should include a positive development of the public image as well as a mid-term effect on the market of entertainment software in the desired direction – the more revenue that is generated from games conforming with the quality criteria of the agency, the more such games will be produced and be available (37).

Regarding the structure and procedures, Maaß (39) proposed several options, based on the experience and example of similar institutions, such as the USK or the Austrian rating board for cinematic movies. Each game should be evaluated in detail by two independent and accordingly qualified assessors. In addition, Maaß (60) suggested the participation of children and youth in the assessment process, to ensure the acceptance of the quality seal among young gamers.

## **Study 2: Acceptance of Positive Assessment**

As the feasibility study answered the question about the acceptance of the strategy from the side of the publishers and retailers, we were now interested in the consumer acceptance. In spring 2003 Christian Hofer, from the institute for applied marketing research at the Johannes-Kepler-University in Linz, was commissioned a small census amongst parents and other adults about to buy games for children (younger than 19).

The aims and objectives of this study were to find out:

- whether parents know about the gaming preferences of their children,
- who participates in the process of purchase decision for the game,
- what they take care of when buying a game,
- what measures they deem useful in dealing with potentially youth endangering games, and

- whether they would accept the implementation of a strategy of positive assessment of computer games in Austria (Hofer 2003, 2).

The survey was conducted from 9<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> May 2003 in the area of Linz, the capital city of the province of Upper Austria, by the means of a questionnaire based face-to-face interview. The respondents were recruited directly at major shopping malls. The interviews were carried out by a group of students. 123 interviews were conducted, 121 datasets were complete and could be evaluated statistically. 72% of the interviewed persons had children in their household, 28% were about to buy games for children that are not their own (7).

The first part of the interview concerned the involvement of the parents in the gaming behaviours and preferences of their children. It turned out that 55% claimed to know about their children's preferences very well and another 35% had at least a general idea. Only 10% admitted to know nothing (9). 30% of the interviewed persons claimed, they would try the games personally and 29% play together with their children (11). Regarding an age limit, until which parents care about what their children play, a distinct trend is noticeable: 59% of the interviewed stated the age limit to be 14 years. Only 6% cared until their children's 10<sup>th</sup> birthday and 36% cared until their minors coming to the age of consent (12). It is remarkable that parents, who play games themselves, turned out to be less interested in the gaming behaviour of the older children than non-gamers: 31% of the gamers cared until their children's 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, versus 39% of the non-gamers (13).

The second part of the interview asked for the process of purchase decision. It turned out that 49% claimed to take the wishes of the children into account and 19% followed the wishes of the children completely. Only 21% made game selections alone, mainly based on whether a game is non-violent or not (34%), or on the appeal of the content in general (33%). The price was named by 29%, possible learning effects by 23%. Far off with less than 10% were recommendations by the salesperson and graphics/sound, the package and the profile of the publisher (22).

90% of the interviewed persons felt sure there are games that could endanger the development of children, and only 5% believed there are no dangerous games at all. In dealing with such games, 68% thought strong regulations based on age-ratings are useful, and 50% deemed an

index of youth endangering media a good idea. However, the option with the top acceptance of 76% was the implementation of a seal of quality. Overall 88% claimed to be interested in an official Austrian seal of quality (30) and 89% stated that they would prefer a game with such a seal (31). Regarding the means of support for the decision process, 66% said that they would prefer to find the games with a seal of quality in dedicated shelves; only 24% would prefer support from the salesperson.

In conclusion, the study showed that persons who buy computer or console games for children are generally interested in information about the games and care about what their children play. It was also shown that an official Austrian seal of quality as implementation of a strategy of positive assessment would be accepted, and that games awarded with this seal could expect stimulated demand. Dedicated shelves on the sales floor would best satisfy the needs of parents.

### **Transfer and Implementation**

Based on the findings of these two studies the development and operation of a “Federal Office for the Positive Assessment of Computer and Console Games” (in short: BuPP) within the structures of the Austrian Federal Ministry for Youth was authorized in the autumn of 2003. An according project structure started in February 2004 with fundamental research on the required catalogue of criteria and the necessary considerations to implement these criteria. In parallel a structure for the assessment process and according codes of conduct were defined, tested and refined.

In summer 2005 the project team of the ministry’s department had developed a manual for the assessment of games, which comprised of three sections: a small section with technical aspects, and the two main sections regarding gaming fun and pedagogical aspects. The latter took pronounced provisions for not only problematic issues, such as violence, but also the positive potentials of games. Following the findings of Gebel, Gurt & Wagner (2005), the manual attempted to map the dimensions of competence stimulation as defined in this study.

The process for the evaluation of games was now built around a weekly meeting of the Assessment Commission, in which two assessors, who tested the game in question at large, an external expert and two represen-



tatives of the ministry worked together and discussed each case before finding a majority decision about the awarding or declining of the seal of quality. After several test-runs, the BuPP started its official operation in November 2005. Since then a list of recommendable games is published online at [www.bupp.at](http://www.bupp.at) and updated almost weekly. A general agreement with retailers to present the listed games on dedicated shelves has not yet been established. Single vendors, however, have started to do so.

With the list of the recommendable games as its primary goal, the BuPP subsequently started to develop background information for parents and educators. The objective is to prepare the grounds for an unbiased, impartial public discussion on the framing conditions for gaming. We want to motivate parents to care for what their children do, and pedagogues to accept games as a popular leisure time activity amongst youngsters. It is a midterm perspective for the BuPP to prepare and disseminate concepts for pedagogical interventions with computer games, to foster the transfer of skills acquired informally when gaming into formal educational settings.

Having this agenda, more and further research is necessary and the BuPP has already started to commission according studies as well as performing basic research on its own. One of the commissioned studies returned raw data in 2007.

### **Study 3: Self Perception of Youngsters on Their Gaming Behaviour**

A part of the so called *elf/18* study (Großegger 2007) was dedicated to find out about the self perception of youngsters on their gaming behaviour and the regarding communication processes in their families. This study was conducted as a representative face-to-face, standardized questionnaire based, multi topic survey of young people in Austria, aged 11 to 18 years (n=880). The field work took place in October and November 2006.

The aims and objectives of the relevant questions of this study were to find out:

- How often do youngsters play computer and console games?
- What do they play and in what settings?

- What communication processes and rules are established in their families regarding their gaming?

The descriptive findings can be summarized as follows.

*Q: How often do you play computer or console games in your leisure time?*

Overall 18.6% claimed to play almost every day and another 20.4% several times a week. Compared with this group of “Intense Players” of 39%, the group of the occasional players was of almost size with 38.1%. More than a fifth claimed to play not at all. There is, however, a very strong and noticeable gender gap: 55.2% of the boys stated that they were intense players, whereas only 22.7% of the girls belonged to this group. The situation is reciprocal with the group of occasional players with 33.7% of the boys and 42.6% of the girls. 10% of the boys and 32.9% of the girls claimed that they never play computer or console games.

	<i>Total</i>	<i>Age</i>		<i>Sex</i>	
		<i>11 to 14</i>	<i>15 to 18</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
(Almost) daily	18.6	21.0	16.1	28.1	8.9
Several times a week	20.4	20.7	20.2	27.1	13.8
Several times a month	13.6	14.7	12.6	13.8	13.5
Rarely	24.5	24.0	25.0	19.9	29.1
Never, I do not play at all at the PC or console	21.4	17.7	25.2	10.0	32.9
N/A	1.4	1.9	1.0	1.2	1.7
Sample size	880	440	440	440	440

*Table 1. How often do you play computer or console games? From: elf/18, Großegger 2007.*

*Q: What games do you prefer personally? (Multiple answers possible)*

The data shows that boys prefer action games (61.1%) over racing (49%) and strategy games (40.4%). In comparison girls that play prefer fun and party games (48.7%) over simulations and minigames (36.9% each). This confirms that boys prefer competitive games, whereas girls favour games with a social context.

	Total	Age		Sex	
		11 to 14	15 to 18	Male	Female
Action games	42.7	44.9	40.4	61.1	17.6
Role playing games	23.3	21.0	25.9	31.7	12.0
Shooter	25.7	19.0	33.0	39.6	6.6
Strategy	30.0	26.2	34.2	40.4	15.8
Adventure	17.6	15.4	19.9	22.8	10.3
Fun or party games	35.1	39.5	30.4	25.3	48.7
Sport games (except racing games)	27.9	25.7	30.3	38.2	13.8
Racing games	37.0	38.7	35.2	49.0	20.5
Simulations	30.6	31.4	29.7	26.0	36.9
Jump and Runs	15.3	13.2	17.5	16.5	13.6
Edutainment or infotainment	8.1	8.1	8.0	6.8	9.7
Mini-Games	30.8	29.2	32.5	26.3	36.9
Arcade (except Beat 'em ups)	25.6	24.7	26.7	20.5	32.7
Beat 'em ups	17.0	13.1	21.3	22.7	9.2
Online games	18.8	17.4	20.3	22.8	13.2
Retro games	9.8	7.0	12.8	6.6	8.1
None of the above	6.5	6.6	6.4	2.6	11.7
Sample size (players)	676	353	323	391	285

*Table 2. What games do you prefer personally? From: elf/18, Großegger 2007.*

*Q: There are different possibilities to play computer and console games. How do you play? (Multiple answers possible)*

The data again shows that competitive settings are preferred by the boys. For example, playing “together with friends in smaller groups” was favoured by 41.6% of the boys but only 32.3% of the girls. Similar results were obtained for LAN Parties (14.9% vs. 6.3%) or online leagues (7.8% vs. 1.2%).

	Total	Age		Sex	
		11 to 14	15 to 18	Male	Female
At the PC	69.6	69.1	70.1	70.7	68.1
At the mobile phone	35.8	39.4	31.9	34.8	37.2
At the mobile console (PSP, DS, etc.)	32.8	41.6	23.1	35.8	28.6
At the non-mobile console (PS2, X-Box360, etc.)	43.9	42.2	45.6	52.2	32.4
Together with friends in smaller groups	37.7	37.0	38.4	41.6	32.3
At the amusement arcade	11.7	11.6	11.8	13.6	9.1
Online	27.8	24.7	31.1	33.1	20.5
At LAN Parties	11.3	7.8	15.1	14.9	6.3
At tournaments, challenges, leagues via internet	5.0	3.1	7.1	7.8	1.2
In a clan, a guild or similar	5.3	4.4	6.3	8.7	0.7
None of the above	4.4	4.7	4.1	2.5	7.0
Sample size (players)	676	353	323	391	285

*Table 3. How do you play? From: elf/18, Großegger 2007.*

*Q: What do your parents think about computer games?*

More than half of the youngsters, and still more than 40% of the kids between 11 and 14 years, felt that their parents do not care if and what they play on the PC or console. Regarding the communication and rules on gaming within the families there seems to be only a minor gender difference: Boys tended to feel more controlled and confined than girls. However, this appears to be a consequence of the fact that girls stated that they play less in general, hence they are expected to be less controlled as well.

	Total	Age		Sex	
		11 to 14	15 to 18	Male	Female
My parents don't care if and what I play	52.0	40.1	64.0	50.9	53.2
My parents forbid computer or console games in general	6.9	4.9	8.9	5.4	8.4
My parents forbid some of the games I would like to play	13.2	21.0	5.4	19.2	7.2
My parents give only games to me that are marked "recommendable"	10.5	15.7	5.3	10.2	10.8
My parents decide how long I am allowed to play	18.0	28.7	7.3	20.1	15.9
When punishing me, my parents forbid games	12.8	18.4	7.2	17.4	8.1
My parents know the games I am playing	29.6	38.7	20.4	30.4	28.8
My parents sometimes watch and ask what I am playing	38.0	43.5	32.5	41.3	34.6

*(cont'd.)*

	Total	Age		Sex	
		11 to 14	15 to 18	Male	Female
My parents sometimes play the games together with me	15.8	17.0	14.6	16.9	14.6
My parents do not understand what I like about the games, but they let me play what I want	24.6	19.8	29.4	30.2	19
My father plays the same games I play	9.0	8.7	9.4	9.6	8.4
My mother plays the same games I play	3.9	4.0	3.7	2.7	5.1
Sample size	880	440	440	440	440

*Table 4. What do your parents think about computer games? From: elf/18, Großegger 2007.*

As no detailed statistical analysis has been conducted with the data of the elf/18 study so far, a lot of questions are raised but not yet answered. The gender gap in gaming behaviour appears to be confirmed once more. Furthermore, a deeper insight regarding the gaming preferences of girls and boys should be possible after further analysis. The results regarding the social aspects of gaming are particularly interesting: at least 37% of the respondents preferred to play not (always) alone. If we take into account online, LAN, and league-players that did not identify themselves as group players, the total number of social-players is likely to come close the 50%. The image of the socially isolated game player appears to be a public misconception.

The data clearly shows however that a main focus for the future work of the BuPP will come from dealing with the family situation of teenage gaming: as any means of protecting minors has to be carried out and sup-

ported by the families, the BuPP will have to stimulate more communication and understanding within homes.

### **Future Research**

As mentioned before, special analysis will be conducted with the data from the elf/18 study. This, however, will only make clear how much more research is necessary to understand gaming behaviour and its social and communicative aspects. This research will have to incorporate parents and family structures in order to supply the basis for pedagogic and political measures.

Therefore pre-tests for a study among parents similar to the elf/18 study are about to start. Initial results confirm the massive lack of communication within families on the use of games resulting in a fundamental lack of knowledge of parents on what and how their children play. Another expansion of the elf/18 study will have to deal with younger kids, between 6 and 10 years. In need of an applicable questionnaire for interviewing kids that young, the accordant development phase has already begun.

Another field of further research will be in evaluating the potential positive effects on the skills of gamers and in developing models on how to transfer those informal gaming skills in formal education and apprenticeship.

### **Conclusions**

Unfortunately, positive assessment will not have the desired effect as long as children and youngsters are left alone. Getting parents to learn about their children's activities therefore is of fundamental importance in the future strategy of the BuPP. The often raised call for protection of minors by stronger means of law seems to be the result of the situation of parents that feel excessive demands on their shoulders. When age ratings or black listings have to declare potential problems due to their principle functionality, they always carry the risk of sparking off another moral panic. What's more, if youngsters like those games and achieve feelings of success, any ban or prohibition will be counterproductive.

In contrast, the strategy of positive assessment opens the doors to the family by focusing on the potential benefit and the fun of games. It sus-

tains all efforts to foster media competences and provides the grounds for the transfer and utilization of the acquired skills. As noted by Henry Jenkins, competent game use enables new forms of media pedagogies as computer and console gaming increasingly becomes “[...] a space where children teach one another and where, if they would open their eyes, adults could learn a great deal” (Jenkins 2006, 205).

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