



USK Unterhaltungssoftware
Selbstkontrolle

Protecting children and young people

Age Classifications for computer and
video games in Germany



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Elisabeth Secker

Managing Officer of the
German Entertainment Software
Self-Regulation Body, USK

Dear readers,

over recent decades, digital games have become a natural part of everyday life for many people.

Developments in recent years have also shown that games can not only be entertainment, but also a medium for learning as well as a cultural asset and art. Digital games are as diverse as the people who use and design them: As with books or films, the range is about as wide as our imagination can stretch.

In order to enable children and adolescents to participate in digital entertainment without hesitation, possible risks and dangers must be effectively countered. Today more than ever, practical media protection for young people suitable for everyday use must, therefore, be seen holistically and must be done with a view to the future. In addition to the protection of children and adolescents, this includes the promotion of media competence and the creation of orientation in the digital world. As a task for society as a whole, the protection of minors is a joint responsibility of parents, the state and companies. The USK age rating symbols have made a significant contribution to this for over 25 years.

As the state-approved self-regulation body for publishers of digital games and apps, it is important to us to explain the protection of minors as simply and comprehensibly as possible. In this brochure, we therefore answer the questions that are asked most frequently.

1 What is the state doing to protect children and adolescents from the risks and dangers of digital games?

Compared to the rest of the world, Germany has some of the most compulsory rules for the classification of digital games available to children and adolescents. Which rules apply depends on how these games are distributed – on physical media or in solely digital form. That means: Games that are available in retail stores on physical media such as discs or game cartridges are subject to the German Youth Protection Act (JuSchG). Games and apps that are only distributed online, i.e. are directly available in a browser or through a digital shop (such as Steam or the Google Play Store), are governed by the Interstate Treaty on the Protection of Minors in the Media (JMStV) agreed upon by the federal states.



If digital games on physical media are to be accessible to children or adolescents in public, they must be approved for their age group in accordance with § 12 paragraph 1 of the JuSchG since 2003. This means

that they may not be sold, made available or shown on screens to minors without being rated before publication.

The Youth Protection Act is a federal law. It assigns the task of age rating for computer games on physical media to the youth ministries of the 16 federal states. They have agreed that the responsible ministry of the state of North Rhine-Westphalia will take the lead in the task of age classification for all state ministries. For this purpose, the state of North Rhine-Westphalia provides employees who, as Permanent Representatives of the Supreme Youth Protection Authorities of the federal states (OLJB), directly participate in each classification procedure.

The age rating is always issued by the Permanent Representatives of the Supreme Youth Protection Authorities of the federal states (OLJB) and is, therefore, a sovereign administrative act against which legal action can be taken.

The classification of games on physical media is, therefore, regulated uniformly throughout Germany. This

classification is a cooperation between the state and the USK (Unterhaltungssoftware Selbstkontrolle) as the German Entertainment Software Self-Regulation Body.



2 What is the USK and what does it do?

The Unterhaltungssoftware Selbstkontrolle (USK) is a voluntary institution of the digital games industry and is supported by the Freiwillige Selbstkontrolle Unterhaltungssoftware (FSU) GmbH.

The shareholder of the non-profit company is the industry association of the developers, producers and distributors of digital games in Germany ("game" – Verband der deutschen Games-Branche e.V.) Although the shareholder bears the economic risk of the company, he is not responsible for the age ratings.

The USK is responsible for the testing of digital games in Germany and is recognised by the state as the competent self-regulatory body both under the Youth Protection Act and for the online sector under the Interstate Treaty on the Protection of Minors in the Media.

In the area of the Youth Protection Act, state representatives issue the statutory age rating symbols at the end of a USK procedure on the recommendation of independent youth protection experts. In addition, the USK also issues age rating symbols within the international IARC system for online games and apps.

The USK ensures that the games can be tested technically and in terms of content on a wide range of current gaming platforms. The USK is, thus, responsible for ensuring that the classification procedures run smoothly and that all criteria and agreed deadlines are met. The tasks range from the organisation of the classification procedures to the continued education of all those involved in the classification procedure.

The USK is advised by an advisory board. It determines the USK principles as well as the guiding criteria and certifies both game testers and youth protection experts. The members of the advisory board include representatives of the churches, media education, the federal and state youth ministries, the Federal Review Board for Media Harmful to Young Persons (BPjM), youth organisations, the Commission for the Protection of Minors in the Media (KJM), the digital games industry and youth protection experts.

3 How is a game tested and who decides on the age rating?

Criteria

There are defined criteria for the age classification of digital games. These criteria were developed in cooperation by the USK and the Supreme Youth Protection Authorities of the federal states. They take into account the ruling practice of the BPjM and explain which aspects could have a negative impact on the development of children and adolescents (see pages 20 to 39).

Game testers

Game testers are responsible for ensuring that a game is played in its entirety before it is reviewed. They then present the game to a review panel with experts for the protection of minors. The game testers do not recommend any age rating to the committee. They are always ready to answer the panel's questions about the game's



Child protection experts

Since 2003, a USK Classification Committee consists of four voluntary youth protection experts and a Permanent Representative of the Supreme Youth Protection Authorities of the federal states (OLJB). The fifty or so experts are appointed by the USK Advisory Council on the basis of a joint proposal from the Supreme Youth Protection Authorities of the Federal States (OLJB) and the digital games industry.

The youth protection experts are independent of both the USK and the games industry, i.e. they must not be employed in the digital games industry. They all work in professions that deal with the use and experience of media by children and adolescents. This includes, for example, activities in child protective services, in science, in church institutions or with voluntary youth welfare organisations. Many of them also carry experience from other media self-regulation bodies, such

as the FSK (Freiwillige Selbstkontrolle der Filmwirtschaft) or the FSF (Freiwillige Selbstkontrolle Fernsehen). This results in an ever different, diverse and pluralistic make up of the individual classification panels which decide by a simple majority vote. Games can thus be judged from different perspectives, which is a great quality feature of the classification process. The experts recommend an age rating to the Permanent Representatives of the Supreme Youth Protection Authorities of the federal states (OLJB).

Permanent Representative of the Supreme Youth Protection Authorities of the Federal States (OLJB) at the USK

The age rating recommended by a review panel is adopted by the Permanent Representative of the Supreme Youth Protection Authorities of the federal states (OLJB) as his or her own decision on age the rating, unless the publisher or the Permanent Representative

lodges an appeal within the set time limit. If an age rating is issued by the Supreme Youth Protection Authorities of the federal states (OLJB), the result of the review can be found as an age rating on the packaging and discs or cartridges of games and also as a notice on the Internet regarding games classified by the USK and approved by the OLJB. The classification results can be found in the USK database at www.usk.de.



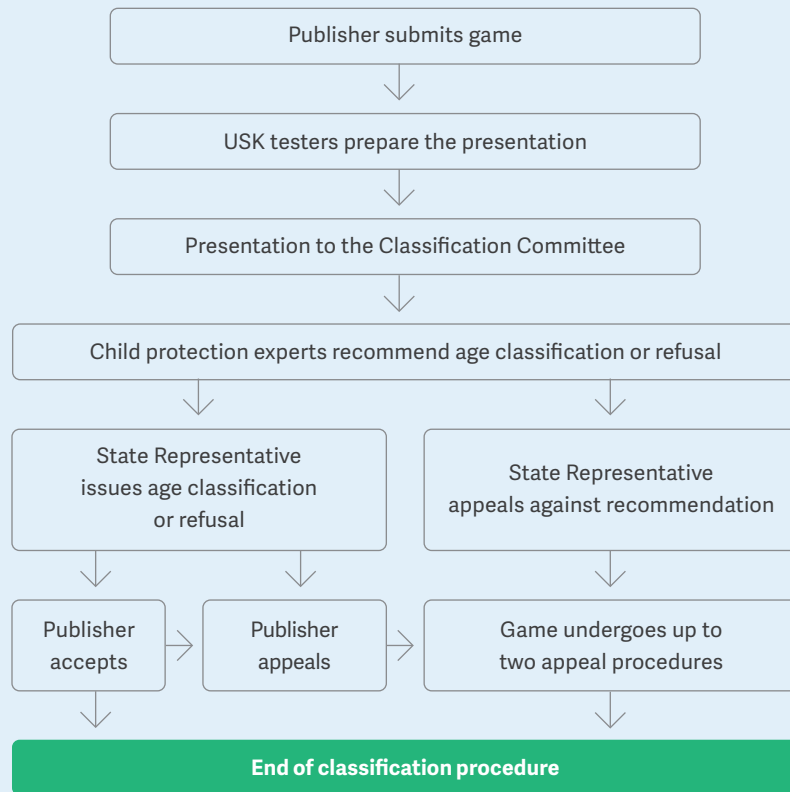
Lidia Grashof

Permanent Representative of the Supreme Youth Protection Authorities of the Federal States at the USK



Uwe Engelhard

Permanent Representative of the Supreme Youth Protection Authorities of the Federal States at the USK



4 What are the age ratings and criteria?



**Approved
without age restriction
according to § 14 JuSchG**

Game content and genres

Games without age restriction can be aimed at children and adolescents as well as adults, as long as they do not contain any impairment for children from the point of view of the protection of minors. These can include family-friendly games such as skill and parlour games, but also sports games, simulations, brainteasers, adventures and role-playing games. Games with this age rating may be quite complex and difficult to learn to use. This means that they may not

yet be fully understood and mastered by younger children as long as they are safe in terms of content.

Criteria for the age category

»Approved without age restriction«

Games with an age rating of „Approved without age restriction“ do not contain any alarming depictions of violence and do not confront children with situations that cause lasting anxiety. With typical children's games, the game world often gives a friendly and colourful impression. The calm gameplay means that even younger children are not subjected to an increased pressure to act. The play tasks are also suitable for children.

However, the age rating does not provide any information as to whether the game is suitable or pedagogi-

cally valuable for pre-school children, whether they are able to master the game technically and in terms of content, whether the tasks and graphics of the game have always been implemented in a child-friendly manner or whether text inserts and spoken language are already understood by pre-school children.

Tip for parents: Make sure to research and understand a game's content before each purchase (e.g. on the Internet) or ask the sales staff for advice.



Snipperclips
Nintendo



FIFA 19
EA Sports



SingStar
Sony Interactive Entertainment



Cities: Skylines
Koch Media





**Approved
for children aged 6 and above
according to § 14 JuSchG**

Game content and genres

These games are predominantly family-friendly games that may be more exciting and more competitive – for example by having a higher pace and more complex game tasks. These include, for example, fast-paced racing games, peaceful strategy games, as well as adventure and role-playing games.

Criteria for the age category

»Approved for children aged 6 and above«

Children from 6 to 11 years develop the ability to assess media content in a more differentiated and distanced way. They learn more and more to distinguish between the game world and reality. In addition, they are able to cope with short moments of tension as well as with a pressure to act that is lessened by breaks.

The game tasks are faster and often require better hand-eye coordination than games without age restrictions. Many game concepts for this age group focus on sporting competition or skill, show fantasy worlds as settings or well-known comic and animation heroes as game characters. The graphic design as well as the overall plot allow even young primary school children to easily gain some distance from the action.

If antagonism between game characters plays a role, these conflicts cannot be confused with everyday reality. Instead, they are presented in a fairy-tale or abstract-symbolic manner. Battle scenes framed in this way should neither unsettle children nor provide socially damaging role models.

Games that expose 6-year-old children to unreasonable stress, cause them lasting anxiety or emotional overload or excite them excessively, acoustically and/or visually are excluded.



Spyro Reignited Trilogy
Activision



The Sims 4
Electronic Arts



Minecraft
Microsoft



Fe
Electronic Arts





**Approved
for children aged 12 and above
according to § 14 JuSchG**

Game content and genres

These games are often much more combat-oriented. The game scenarios are often framed by a historical, comic-like, futuristic or fairy-tale-like mystical storyline, so that they offer sufficient distancing possibilities for players. This age rating includes arcade, strategy and role-playing games and some military simulations, but also classic adventure games or genre mixes.

Criteria for the age category

»Approved for children aged 12 and above«

12 to 15-year-olds are already considered more capable than younger children of distinguishing between the fictional game world and reality. They can already draw on diverse and complex media experiences and use them to

distance themselves from a rousing game. The depiction and framing of fights or disputes ensure that they remain clearly recognisable as part of an imaginary game world, even for 12-year-olds. This age group can cope with longer-lasting tension as well as greater pressure to act when fulfilling game tasks. The often more complex tasks require skills of abstract and logical thinking. Accordingly, the demands on the hand-eye coordination skills of players also increase.

Many games with this characteristic show fantastic creatures as antagonistic characters, rely on a fascination with technology in past or future societies or on the motivation to be a hero in an epic world full of sagas and myths. Gloomy threat and conflict situations can occur, but they do not persist throughout the game.

If depictions of violence are included, they appear unrealistic to the 12 to 15-year-old age group, so that they are not transferred to everyday situations and do not offer models for conflict resolution.

As long as they are framed by the plot and not shown in too much detail, more realistic acts of violence can also be thematised (for example, when solving a criminal case). Similarly, topics such as violence or sex can play a role in settings close to everyday life – for example, if problems of growing up are addressed in an appropriate manner. The resulting confrontation or identification with problems and characters may be challenging for 12-year-olds, but should not be disturbing or socially-ethically/sexually disorienting.



Dragon Ball FighterZ
Bandai Namco



The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild
Nintendo



Monster Hunter: World
Capcom



Sea of Thieves
Microsoft





**Approved
for children aged 16 and above
according to § 14 JuSchG**

Game content and genres

Games with an age rating of 16 years and above also show violent acts, so that adults clearly belong to the group of buyers. Often the games are about armed combat with a story and military missions. The most common genres include action adventures, shooters, open-world games, role-playing games, beat'em ups and military strategy games.

Games with an age rating of 16 years and older may focus more on violence, which is why they are clearly no longer suitable for children. However, fights and violent conflicts always remain framed by the plot or story.

In multiplayer games, this framing can also take place through teamwork or fair competition, for example.

Criteria for the age category

»Approved for children aged 16 and above«

16 to 17-year-olds already possess a varied and systematic media experience and knowledge of media production. In addition, they can cope with longer-lasting tension and higher pressure to act when fulfilling game tasks without impairment to their personality development. Although games with this rating also contain combat-oriented and violent content, neither the game plot nor the game options convey socially damaging messages or role models. For this age group, disputes and fights remain recognisable as games.

Success in the game requires strategic and tactical thinking as well as the ability to play in a team. Although games with this characteristic sometimes put 16- to 17-year-olds under considerable strain, non-violent elements and unrealistic game elements allow them to distance themselves from the action, so that the development of adolescents is not lastingly impaired.



Devil May Cry 5
Capcom



Nioh
Sony Interactive Entertainment



Shadow of the Tomb Raider
Square Enix



Sudden Strike 4
Kalypso Media





**Not approved
for young persons aged under 18
according to § 14 JuSchG**

Game content and genres

As these games almost exclusively consists of violent game concepts and often create a dark and threatening atmosphere, they are exclusively for adults. The genres include first-person shooters, action adventures, role-playing games and open-world games. The game's stories often take place to the backdrop of, for example, warlike conflicts or brutal fights between rival groups.

Criteria for the age category

»Not approved for young persons aged under 18«

These games are generally not rated for minors, as they can be detrimental to their development. This

protects minors from drastic depictions of violence or antisocial ideologies. Also, games are denied an age rating for minors if their game mechanisms convey the degradation of characters as normal or even positive. In general, the goal is to prevent young players from identifying with characters whose actions do not meet the ethical and moral requirements of our society.

The often dense atmosphere and high authenticity of the game can make it difficult even for older adolescents to distance themselves from the game. The content and presentation of these games require a degree of social maturity and distance that cannot generally be expected from 16-17 year olds. Although the rating „Not approved for young persons aged under 18“ means that a game could be detrimental to

minors, it excludes content harmful to minors within the meaning of § 18 Paragraph 1 of the Youth Protection Act (JuSchG).

The Youth Protection Act (JuSchG) also stipulates that games on physical media may not be rated by the USK if they meet the indexing criteria of the Federal Review Board for Media Harmful to Young Persons (BPjM). For this reason, it needs to be determined whether one of the indexing criteria applies to a game, e.g. whether „acts of violence against and killings of human and human-like characters dominate the medium in its entirety“ or „acts of violence, in particular murder and slaughter, are presented in a detailed manner and for their own purpose“. Game content must also be checked for the criterion of „immorality“. All indexing criteria can be found at www.bundespruefstelle.de.



Dead Rising 4

Capcom



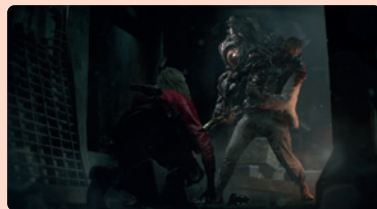
Days Gone

Sony Interactive Entertainment



Call of Duty: WWII

Activision



Resident Evil 2

Capcom



5 What are the consequences of the age rating symbols?

For the retail trade

With the age rating symbols, the state regulates whether a computer game may be sold to children and adolescents in public. The retail trade must comply with the restrictions on distribution associated with the labels. A game that is approved for children aged 12 and above may not be sold to a 10-year-old child. Violations of these regulations will be punished as an administrative offence in accordance with § 28 of the Youth Protection Act (JuSchG) and can be fined up to 50,000 Euros. The retail trade is controlled by the local regulatory authorities. These can be made aware of violations immediately.

For parents

In principle, the state does not regulate how and which media content parents make available to their children at home. However, parents should only give or allow their children to play games that have an appropriate age rating. Only then can they be sure that the game is safe for their child.

However, the age rating is not an indication of pedagogical suitability for a particular age or of the quality of a game. They merely guarantee that the computer game is safe for an age group from the point of view of the protection of minors. Information on the pedagogical suitability of a game can be found online at:

www.spieleratgeber-nrw.de, www.spielbar.de
or www.internet-abc.de.

6 What does it mean if a game has no rating?

Games distributed on physical media such as discs or game cartridges without an age rating label could contain content harmful to minors in accordance with § 18 Paragraph 1 of the Young Protection Act (JuSchG) as such games have either not been classified by the USK or a rating had to be refused after classification.

These could also be illegally produced copies, the use of which would violate criminal law. Furthermore, the games may also have been imported from abroad, but their age ratings are not valid in Germany.

The distribution of unrated games to children and adolescents is prohibited in all cases.

Digital games that have not been issued a rating may be purchased by adults, but can be indexed by the Federal Review Board for Media Harmful to Young Persons (BPjM).

In the online sector, the Interstate Treaty on the Protection of Minors in the Media (JMStV) contains different regulations on the rating of content. You can read more about this topic on page 51.

7 What does „indexed“ mean and what consequences does it have for a computer game?

Games with depictions of violence that not only impair but also endanger (i.e. are harmful to) the development and education of adolescents are indexed by the BPjM. This means that these games are included in the „List of media harmful to adolescents“ according to §18 of the Young Protection Act (JuSchG).

Computer games can only be indexed if they do not have a statutory USK age rating. The procedure for this is carried out by the „Federal Review Board for Media Harmful to Young Persons“ (BPjM).

Indexed games may, in particular,

- not be given to children and adolescents,
- not advertised in public and not be exhibited or broadcast,
- not be distributed by mail order.

However, they must still be legally available to adults – either in a special shop accessible only to adults or via the Internet in a closed user group accessible only to adults. Information on reasons for indexing and the work of the Federal Review Board for Media Harmful to Young Persons can be found online at www.bundespruefstelle.de

8 Can digital games be banned in Germany?

Digital games can be banned in Germany if they include content that is prohibited in Germany by the German Penal Code (StGB) (e.g. excessive violence, racism, warmongering, propaganda for banned, anti-constitutional organisations).

A ban on digital games can only be validly imposed on the basis of a court order. Such games may then be confiscated. In Germany, they may also no longer be sold even to adults.

9 Age ratings for digital games assigned by the state: Isn't that censorship?

According to Article 5, Paragraph 1 of the German Constitution (GG) – freedom of expression – there is no censorship in Germany. According to Article 5, Paragraph 2 of the German Constitution (GG), however, freedom of expression „is limited by (...) the statutory provisions for the protection of adolescents“, i.e. in the Youth Protection Act (JuSchG).

Age ratings for computer and console games are, thus, considered to be a restriction on access exclusively for children and adolescents. Since adults have legal access to indexed and unrated computer games, there is no censorship.

10 What can parents do to support safe and meaningful play?

- Only buy games for your child that have an appropriate age rating (USK) and only let your child play games in the appropriate age group.
- Make sure that younger children in the family do not experience the games played by their older siblings.
- Children under 3 years of age should not play digitally at all, as it overwhelms them.
At the age of 4-5 years, you can already offer children educational software and games that are appropriate for their age. However, the child should not play alone on a computer or console until the age of 6.

- Familiarise yourself with the parental control system offered for the gaming platform used. Most providers offer numerous options for filtering by age group, but also for limiting online purchases, user communication or playtime, for example. More information on these systems for the protection of minors can be found at www.usk.de
- When playing online games, educate your child about safety risks in relation to online communication (for more information go to: www.klicksafe.de; www.schau-hin.info).
- Talk to your child about their games. Your child will be happy if you show interest in their hobby and gladly explain even the most complex aspects of games.

- Together with your child, determine play times (e.g. for children aged 8 to 10 years max. 1 hour per day) and take into account the times that are already classified as media time (e.g. smartphone and television).
- If you have any questions about specific age ratings for games, you can contact the Permanent Representatives of the Supreme Youth Protection Authorities of the federal states (OLJB) at the USK directly: staendige.vertreter@usk.de.

11 Which age rating symbols apply online?

In addition to the classification procedure in accordance with the Youth Protection Act (JuSchG), the USK also issues age rating for online games and apps. **This is done within the international IARC system (International Age Rating Coalition).** This means that age ratings from the USK are available on all sales platforms connected to this system. The connected systems include, for example, Google Play Store, Nintendo eShop, Microsoft Store and the Oculus Store.

The developers and publishers of the individual games and apps go through a questionnaire provided by IARC, from which the appropriate age rating is being calculated. **The USK uses various control procedures to ensure the quality of the age ratings.**



The International Age Rating Coalition (IARC) is an association of the various organisations responsible for the worldwide age rating of online games and apps. Since its foundation in 2013, IARC has provided a system that is integrated into the technical platforms and mobile app stores for the purpose of protecting minors. This system enables the developers and publishers of the individual products to classify their contents by means of a questionnaire. This classification results in an age rating according to the specifications of the respective national self-regulation bodies (for Germany, the USK).

The USK regularly reviews the IARC classifications to ensure their quality. User complaints also trigger reviews. The USK works with this system on the legal basis of the Interstate Treaty on the Protection of Minors in the Media (JMStV), under which the USK is

officially recognised as a self-regulatory body in both the telemedia and broadcasting sectors.

With the IARC system, age classification is carried out on the basis of youth impairment criteria. Aspects of criminal law, copyright and other areas of law are not taken into account.

A woman with red hair and glasses is smiling and looking towards a man whose back is to the camera. They are in an office setting with a desk and a plant visible.

Contact

Unterhaltungssoftware Selbstkontrolle (USK)

Torstraße 6 | 10119 Berlin

Tel.: +49 30 2408866-0 | Fax: +49 30 2408866-29

kontakt@usk.de | www.usk.de

Permanent Representatives of the Supreme Youth Protection Authorities of the Federal States at the USK

Torstraße 6 | 10119 Berlin | staendige.vertreter@usk.de

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