

It has been a long time coming that the Australian Classification Board (ACB) had a review of its frankly poor classifications standards. I speak as a 25 year old female with university education who has been playing video games since I was at least 4.

My keypoints can be broken down into:

1. Refusal of Classification (RoC) and why I believe it has no place in video games\*
  - a. RoC in video games dealing with complex ideas and combined with a misunderstanding of content by non-players.
  - b. Retroactively changing classification, specifically retroactively allowing video games previously available to be refused classification.
2. Classifications based on very easily missed AND/OR minor content giving the game a higher rating
  - a. Games where a mechanic or funny scene is played off for laughs giving the content a higher rating
  - b. Games that have been rereleased and are then given a stricter rating because the ACB has either missed the content originally or have different standards in place due to movements that may or may not be relevant in five years time such as "MeToo" and predators in the LGBT such as paedophilia trying to become the P in LGBTQIAP2S, when it is meant to be either polyamory or pansexual depending on who you ask.
3. Lootboxes, microtransactions, and downloadable content
  - a. Lootboxes
  - b. Microtransactions (MTX)
  - c. Downloadable content (DLC)
4. What does a rating mean to a parent?

I hope through my submission some of these are points are taken into account.

1. RoC can occur for many number of reasons currently. It can be for misunderstanding of ideas, or for things we perceive as obscene such as drug abuse and sexual violence. However, I argue that by refusing to classify games, you cause problems in multiple ways, especially in a global market.
  - a. A game called Rule of Rose for the Playstation 2 released in 2006 has no classification on your ratings board, so I am unsure if it was refused classification because it was not banned, but the publisher pulled out. However, the game deals with themes of a woman reliving her childhood at an orphanage with no adults – or in another word, a woman with PTSD. In Europe, it was refused classification due to a misunderstanding of perceived paedophilia due to the character dressing up, however it is an adult character, and again, going through old memories that are traumatic. There is also the content of children doing certain things, but I will leave that to the quote at the end. Because of this, I believe the board at the time did not play the game and review it, rather, they relied on their European cohort, who had misinformation given to them by the public.  
Rule of Rose was a horror game tackling something different – not physical horrors such as zombies and vampires, but psychological trauma, and the woman was reliving her life. There are some uncomfortable scenes involving

two girls, however it was never meant to be of erotic nature; children perceive things very differently from adults. Some quotes from the developers include:

*“Well basically we wanted to make a new type of horror game, one which wasn’t the usual zombie, ghost and slasher type.”*

*“If we look at it through the eyes of adults, when girls play with each other in this way it may be considered somewhat erotic, but with kids, I...really don’t think they’d see it that way. It’s more genuine, not lustful. It may appear so because these are things kids actually do, but we don’t want to see.”*

Collected quotes from interview archived here:

[https://web.archive.org/web/20160304094533/http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/2718/thank\\_heaven\\_for\\_little\\_girls\\_why\\_.php](https://web.archive.org/web/20160304094533/http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/2718/thank_heaven_for_little_girls_why_.php)

- b. Games have been retroactively reclassified due to various things, including coming out of early access, or through updated content. An example of this is DayZ, a game that had been available on distributor Steam for several years, when in 2019, it was refused classification. It thus is no longer potentially available physically. It has also apparently been changed as the link no longer works  
<https://www.classification.gov.au/Pages/View.aspx?sid=gz0aSYFv0o1BKPOzy7Etbw%253d%253d&ncdctx=s4WpdN3XPMCekIxVnkOX26Cfvi5J9BQPhs8Wo1nuP3TnFisvGzKrxTNaA6aKhvkX>), but more importantly the connotation that retroactive RoC can occur are very important. A game that is no longer available in the market leads to one of two things 1) money is effectively taken out of the Australian market as the user goes online and searches for keys for the good or searches for physical copies of the game, thus denying retailers and stores that comply with the GST revenue. 2) If goods aren’t available, what can occur and does occur is piracy. We’ve seen many times with goods that aren’t available locally, individuals will pirate, but if given the option to go legal through things such as streaming services, the individual is much more likely to pay for the goods.
2. There have been times I’ve raved about how excited I am for a game, and I’m looking forward to sharing it with my friends or family (depending on the age ratings), only to find myself kind of embarrassed because there’s a R18+ rating. It changes my expectation of the type of game it is. So when I played two games, Labyrinth of Refrain: Coven of Dusk, and Atelier Rorona Plus, I was a bit shocked to find nothing.
  - a. Labyrinth of Refrain: Coven of Dusk released in 2018 for various consoles and PC in English. It was a game where you controlled puppets, they had a sex for gameplay mechanics of setting out how many puppets were in battle, and the game was a fun dungeon crawler. There was content that was MA15+ for sure, and I was questioning – this must be why – but it never pushed itself further. After finishing the game, I was reminded of a demon encountered late in the game that would massage female puppets to increase their CHARM stat – a stat for avoidance essentially – for a ridiculous amount of money – not ever really worth it. I later found out, in Japanese the stat was called SEXY or something along those lines. Only then did my mind kind of wander in that direction, and

even then, the characters you play as are puppets, so it didn't wander that far. It made me realise as well that it was missable content and more importantly, open to interpretation what happened, as I saw it as the female dolls getting a makeover, whereas the ACB clearly saw other wise. I also argue that if a teenage version of myself wouldn't have interpreted it this way, then it was probably safe for the lower rating. I'd also argue that it is a kind of good message – you can pay your way to beauty, but it won't be worth it.

- b. High Impact Sexual Violence. Your words, not mine. These words were echoed across the internet as Australia was a bunch of nannystates, because what is harmful in a sweet game like Rorona? One scene – missable as well, and in fact, so missable, the original release of Atelier Rorona got a PG rating – a scene with a drunk Tiffany. Maybe it's my age showing, maybe it's because I had alcoholic parents and friends, but the scene in question has a character who is so drunk they begin to make advances on their friend sexually. I've had it happen to me (girlfriends) because they're at that point in drinking where they should have stopped ages ago, but more importantly, they're just venting frustrations. That was the vibe I got from that scene. The fact that the scene was missed the first time though is really bad on the board's behalf, but after the fact, the rating was an over reaction. It's an uncomfortable situation, but it's a real one.  
This game has once again been rereleased, this time as Atelier Rorona ~ The Alchemist of Arland ~ under an M rating. To make it clear to you this game has had the following ratings: PG, R18+, M. Consistency would be nice, especially on the same game.
3. The video game market has changed considerably since I was a child. There were no online interactions. There were no updates. There were no "buy this cool costume" or "buy this item for a chance at some cool cosmetic for your character", only unlockable content that you earned through playing or cheat codes. There was no downloadable content or very few, and it didn't matter because your internet speeds were so poor that you couldn't download it. You bought something, and it was the product in it's full. But with the global market, and the internet, this has changed.  
We now have day one patches. We now have lootboxes. We now have microtransactions especially in free to play games that are either cosmetic or give the player an advantage – sometimes in the pay to play ones too. We now have online interactions. We now have downloadable content. Some of these things aren't bad, and some while not good, aren't inherently evil. This point is a bit heated, so I will break it down into three major points and what I think should be done about them, because two of them are predatory, and the third is variable – sometime predatory, sometimes just scummy, other time's, a love letter to fans.
  - a. \*Lootboxes and gambling – I hate to say it, but plain and simple, I believe we need to have games (new to the market at least) refused classification if they have lootboxes in them. They are gambling, as they entice you with a rare reward (Valve's free to play game Dota 2 does this, Blizzard's pay to play game Overwatch does this, and Epic's current very popular free to play game – particularly with teenagers – Fortnite does this), and encourage spending, sometimes with increased odds if you buy more. I bring up Fortnite because my nephew has been bullied for being "default" by other children his age, so either he pays and hopefully gets something okay and never again, or more likely, he's

enticed because he's already put money into it. And that's the start of a gambling problem – just one more hit.

Adults have also suffered from this. You've put X amount of money in, you can't stop playing the game now because there's a time and the money sink. There have been numerous reports online from various publications including the BBC about how lootboxes have managed to make their way into games, and recovering gamblers get sucked back in. It's not just about protecting the youth from being indoctrinated, it's about protecting the vulnerable, easily addicted group, of which I am a part of. I will share an experience with Dota 2 and Overwatch with you – I didn't spend money on Dota 2, but my friends did. They would send me sets so I could show off like them (I was 17). Overwatch came at a time when I was older and had some money (22) I bought a few lootboxes for the Olympic Mercy skin, and just kept buying until I got it. Originally only \$5, then \$25, then \$50. I spent \$80 on a game I gave up shortly after that on getting a cosmetic. How is that not gambling? It may not be a physical good, but it was a perceived good.

But why I think these need to be refused classification is very simple, and has nothing to do with Australia itself; someone big has to start speaking up for the vulnerable people, and other countries will follow suit. I believe Australia has that power.

- b. Microtransactions (MTX) and free to play games become a problem when the games aren't actually games, or they encourage buy now to skip the wait. This happens mostly on mobile, but it can also occur in premium priced games. I want to see – particularly in mobile games due to their accessibility, microtransactions warranting a strict content feature, and if someone (such as a parent) has said no, it should not pop up again to buy the features. My youngest nephew has tried many times to buy his way around the wait, but thankfully we do not keep our details stored to the device.

But more to it than that, MTX are an introductory feature – they lead in to the idea of paying more for a game than it's worth in free to play games, but also potentially lead to the normalisation of MTX in full priced releases. This is again predatory, and I'll use Crash Team Racing: Nitro-fueled (CTR: Nitro-fueled) as an example here. In CTR: Nitro-fueled, the game starts off with a premium price point at \$60AUD. To earn cosmetics, you have to earn in-game cash, and at release, you had to race online to get the in-game cash. Items were on a daily rotation, so you had to constantly play to get enough coins to get everything. I cancelled my order for a copy after finding out this, because I saw what was coming, and it did happen. MTX occurred, so you could bypass the grind, and buy the characters and cosmetics whenever you wanted for a price. This is a game aimed at children, it had a base price of \$60, and was then asking for more afterwards through MTX. It can be argued that's it's cosmetic only, however, like lootboxes, this is a tactic used to cause sunken cost fallacy in the player.

It could have all been great though, as Dota 2 – a game mentioned previously – had cosmetics that were not lootbox bound – you bought them from an in-game store with real money, and the money went towards the developers, as well as the community artists who made them. This included a female Australian artist, Anuxi. When they swapped over to the lootbox method, artists were paid less,

and stopped making content for the game. The idea here that was wonderful and fell through was a free to play game, where you only paid for cosmetics items that didn't do anything, and it supported not only the developers, but the community around it. Unfortunately, it doesn't seem like this method is used very often, but there are examples of it being used in the past, and thus I don't believe MTXs are inherently evil.

Because of this, I don't believe MTX needs to be refused classification, however it definitely needs to be better regulated. I think because free to play games (particularly mobile) have caused a predatory loop that has invaded premium priced games, there needs to be a change in how we classify them, and I believe again, if Australia starts something, the world could follow suit. I think MTXs thus shouldn't be refused *unless* those MTXs are lootboxes, and MTXs on their own should warrant a strict MA15+, to prevent vulnerable youth being indoctrinated.

- c. Downloadable content (DLC) and ratings is a tough one for me. Obviously, you can't or shouldn't be retroactively changing a classification on a game, but what if the contents changed? What if it has a planned DLC, particularly if it's a paid for one? What about cutting content from a game, charging a premium, then releasing the rest of the content later as paid for DLC?

I think it's worth mentioning before diving in, that DLC can be a labour of love or a love-letter to the fans. Examples of this include Celeste and Hollow Knight, which have both received physical copies, and one had content missing from the game (which the publisher fixed and refunded users who got the cut content version). But if it's not on the cartridge, should there be a warning of some kind? What if the game doesn't have all of it's content on the cartridge or disc like Spyro: Reignited Trilogy? Is that the same thing? I think perhaps known DLC – whether missing parts of game, or simply additional content that's not required needs to be thought about harder, because while we have better internet standards, not everyone has internet access, and some kind of label would be appropriate.

Season passes as DLC are becoming more common, but often times, they weren't an immediate plan, but came later in development, such as Dark Souls: Artorias of the Abyss. They're not planned for, and therefore, nobody should know they're coming, but they still affect the rating of the game if it segregates the player base. An example of a planned for (based on footage shown recently) season pass is Pokemon Sword and Shield, but not only is it segregating player base, it is cut content, and also performing the same tropes that get a child bullied as mentioned in lootboxes, because cut content will be available, but the child won't get access unless they either get lucky with trading, or buy it themselves. Children can be ruthless, and I particularly want a call to action here because this is **the** popular children's game, the highest grossing franchise in the world, and I think they should be doing better by children. \$80 + \$45 for a complete game, and it almost seems no different from MTXs in premium games.

Essentially, in all three of my musings, MTX, DLC, and lootboxes form fairly similar predatory loops, but lootboxes are gambling, MTX's lead to a perceived normalisation, leading to acceptance of lootboxes, and DLC can go either way, depending on what the developer's decide they think of their customers.

I'll also leave a link to a video presentation by the CEO of Tribeflame, Torulf Jernström, on MTXs, and free to play games entitled "Let's go whaling", because it shows how disgustingly predatory this market can be.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xNjI03CGkb4>

4. Where does a rating mean to a parent, and where do we go from here?

That's the big question I ask myself. Why is it okay for a child to play a game like Okami (M) with parental supervision if young, or none if older (10+)? Why is it that Grand Theft Auto V got banned from Target because parents were outraged that their children played it when it had an R18+ rating? I think the guidelines have become a little detached from reality. Maybe people just see blue and think alright. Maybe all video games are for children, despite this new rating (even though it's not new anymore). I'm not sure, but I do think it would be wise to start running campaigns on youtube ads, perhaps encourage limited time offer deals with companies like Netflix such as free for a month, but starting a video in a series will start with an ad to remind people of the classifications, and how they work as a guideline. But then, how does this translate to video games? I am unsure on how to go forward, but something should be done, as there are some in the public ruining things for others because they're not listening to your guidelines.

In summary, I personally would like to see from the board, based on my examples a few things.

- I would like reviewers to review things and try to take out their cultural biases if a game is from another location before assigning a classification. Or, in other words, try to interpret it differently, and critically. This should be do-able because many of your positions are for alumni.
- I would also like to see reviewers consider "Can this be interpreted innocently", and "if I showed this to a 15 year old, how would they interpret it" if they're on the fence about an M, MA15+, or an R18+ rating.
- I would like consistency with ratings, as Atelier Rorona is a perfect example of a lack of such.
- I would like to see a notification on physical copies of games if a game has DLC and MTX. Further, I would like MTX to automatically put the game into an MA15+ rating due to the predatory nature.
- I absolutely want lootboxes redefined as gambling, and prohibit sale if a game has them. I believe Australia can lead the world - we're bigger than Belgium who've already set some standards for this.
- I would like to see I would also like to see a re-education campaign aimed for families because I don't think people perceive M as a Mature rating anymore.

I thank you for taking the time to read and evaluate my opinions on this topic. I know you must be getting many submissions right now, but it makes me feel better as an adult, as a gamer, and as a potential parent, that you are reviewing your standards now.

Sincerely,

Anonymous.