TIGA™

VIDEO GAMES CONSUMER INFORMATION

SEPTEMBER 2024

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ABOUT TIGA

TIGA IS THE NOT-FOR-PROFIT TRADE ASSOCIATION REPRESENTING THE UK VIDEO GAMES INDUSTRY. OUR MEMBERSHIP INCLUDES GAME DEVELOPERS, DIGITAL PUBLISHERS, UNIVERSITIES AND SERVICE PROVIDERS.

TIGA's vision is to make the UK the best place in the world to develop video games. TIGA strives to achieve this in three principal ways.

- Engaging with Government and Parliament to create a favourable environment for the games industry.

- Enhancing excellence in games education and skills through our accreditation programme, the TIGA Games Education Awards and our education conference.

- Driving excellence across our industry via the provision of best practice reports and participation in the TIGA Salary and Benefits Survey, the TIGA STAR Employer Awards and the TIGA Games Industry Awards.

Dr Richard Wilson OBE Is the CEO of TIGA. At TIGA, Richard has successfully campaigned for the introduction of Video Games Tax Relief and an effective Video Games Expenditure Credit, introduced an accreditation system for university and college games courses, launched the prestigious TIGA Games Industry Awards and TIGA Games Education Awards, raised the profile of the industry in media and political circles and won 29 business awards and commendations.

You can find out more about TIGA here and our track record in influencing Government policy.

For more information about membership, please contact: **info@tiga.org**

ABOUT EATON SMITH

TIGA is grateful to Chris Taylor, Partner at Eaton Smith LLP, for working with TIGA to produce this consumer information, but please note that it is for general information only and does not constitute legal advice.

Eaton Smith supports businesses throughout Yorkshire, the UK and internationally from starting-out through to high profile corporate and international transactions. See www.eatonsmith.co.uk

INTRODUCTION

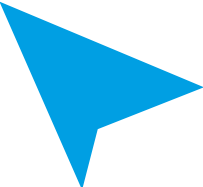**Today, it is estimated that video games are enjoyed by over 3 billion people globally. This popularity can, in part, be attributed to a diversity of content types, ensuring games can appeal to people from different cultures and backgrounds, and to people across a variety of age groups.**

There are a wide range of video game genres to choose from, including action, adventure, survival, battle royale, puzzle and roleplaying to name just a few. Within the genres of games that are available, there are different types of games, each with their own unique storylines and gameplay.

Games are great for young and old alike, and some are perfect for families to play together. However, some games are suitable only for adults to play.

The diversity of video games as consumable content is what makes them such an accessible, universal medium that is enjoyed by so many across the globe. However, what cannot be understated is that not every game is suitable for every player.

It is important that, as consumers of video games, you can recognise which games are, or are not, appropriate for you and your family, and what steps you can take to stay safe when playing video games.

To give an example of how appropriate safeguards are in place, there is an age-rating system here in the UK. This system provides information for players, parents and guardians to make sure people of every age can enjoy games that are appropriate to them. However, age ratings aren't the only thing to consider when it comes to the responsible consumption of video game content.

Games as a consumable medium can bring enjoyment, engagement and entertainment, and they can also promote numerous psychological and behavioural benefits. Games can also be used for education, training and business purposes, as well as for their traditional use – fun!

That said, unless care is taken, it is also possible to play games for too long; spend compulsively on things such as in-app purchases; view age-inappropriate content; and be subjected to bad/toxic behaviour online.

At TIGA, although we are primarily a business-to-business organisation, we believe that it is important to provide advice and guidance about responsible gameplay, and that is why we have created this accessible guide for consumers, parents and guardians.

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Below you can find information and advice on:

• General tips for parents, carers & guardians
• Age ratings and game types
• Health benefits
• Online games and online safety
• Free-to-Play games and in-app purchases
• Gaming Disorder
• What to do if you think you need help.

TIPS FOR PARENTS

Before we discuss any topic in depth, we want to set out some general tips for parents that should help you and your family stay safe online. Some of the topics set out below will be discussed in more depth later, but for now, here are some handy tips for parents/guardians:

• Reassure your child that if there is anything that makes them feel uncomfortable, confused or upset within a video game, they can talk to you without you getting angry.

• Tell your children not to give out personal details in games and encourage them to report inappropriate behaviour to you. This can be passed on to the game's creators via their website, or sometimes even within the game itself using a reporting mechanism.

• Set limits to what games your children can play – and for how long – by using the parental control tools on your games consoles, mobile devices and computers. Parental controls also let you manage what your children can and cannot download. The NSPCC has created a helpful guide to setting up parental controls on a range of devices, and in a variety of cases, covering games consoles and more.

• Never give your children passwords that allow money to be spent online in games. Make sure you handle and approve all in-game spending.

• Monitor your child's screen time. The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health suggests that it is "impossible" to recommend age appropriate time limits for screen time, instead urging parents to "approach screen time based on the child's development age and individual need". For more information see the full report here.

- Always look for the age classification on the game package or app store before purchasing or downloading a game for your child. If you cannot see one, investigate the game further online to determine its suitability before making a purchase.

- Research the games your child is playing to confirm it is appropriate both from a content and difficulty perspective. Try to look for a summary or review of the game content, or ideally play the game yourself first. Games are often playable in stores, at events, or via downloadable demos, and you can often find walkthroughs of the game online via platforms such as YouTube.

- Play video games with your children, watch over them when they play, and talk with them about the games they play. Explain why you feel certain games are not suitable and listen to feedback that your children give about certain aspects of the games that they are playing.

- Be aware that online games sometimes enable the download of extra software that can alter the game content, and possibly the age classification of the game. Before allowing your children to download any extra software or content, check again that it is suitable and age appropriate.

- Understand that online games are usually played in virtual communities, requiring players to interact with other real people over the internet. Sometimes other players will be real-life friends, but in most cases, they will be strangers. Some games will allow you to disable or restrict chat functionality, and you should investigate whether that is possible if you have any concerns about who your children may be speaking with online.

- Apple have additional parental controls that can be added to your child's iPhone, iPad, and iPod touch. You can block or limit specific apps and features on your child's device and restrict the settings to block explicit content, purchases and downloads, and privacy. More information on Apple's parental controls and how to add them to a device can be found here.

Google Play offer similar parental controls for Android devices, more information can be found here.

For more information on video games, see TIGA's Frequently Asked Questions and Answers guide.

AGE RATINGS AND GAMES

In the UK, the developer or publisher of a video game will generally need to obtain an age-rating prior to their game being sold. For physical, boxed games, that is a legal requirement, but at the time of writing, that isn't currently the case in the UK for games which are made available solely online (such as via mobile app platforms or other digital stores/platforms). However, most online distribution platforms that sell games online will insist that an age rating accompanies the game before that game can be sold on their platform, and there are different ways in which that age rating can be obtained (and we discuss that in more depth below).

However, that isn't universally the case across every online distribution platform, and you may find that certain games that are distributed online via certain platforms do not always show an age rating in their digital store page. Therefore, it is important that you take steps to investigate the content of any game that is sold, particularly where that game is sold without an age rating, to confirm whether it is in fact age appropriate. Whether any game is age appropriate will of course depend upon your specific circumstances.

Video game age-ratings are a useful tool, as they offer a simple, clear means to let you know what audience a game is likely going to be suitable for in terms of its themes and its content. Age-ratings may also be accompanied by content descriptors and icons that set out the type of content that appears in the game itself, which can help you make a more informed decision on a game's suitability (and those are discussed in more depth below).

You should bear in mind that age-ratings for video games are set according to the age suitability of a game regarding its content, but not the level of difficulty or complexity of that particular game. You might, for example, see a complicated simulation or a high strategy city-building game with a low age- rating (perhaps PEGI-3 or PEGI-7). That will likely mean it has no content that would be disturbing to a child, but it could still be far too complex for a three or seven-year-old to complete or enjoy. To find out how complex a game is, you can look for reviews and gameplay online, in papers and magazines. Useful websites which offer games reviews include: YouTube, Guardian, Tech Advisors, and Gamespot.

In the UK, age-ratings are given to games by assessing the game's content according to criteria and standards created by the Interactive Software Federation of Europe. Those criteria and standards are known as the "Pan European Game Information" system (or **PEGI** for short), which you may have already heard of.

The PEGI criteria and standards are administrated in the UK by an organisation known as the Games Rating Authority (**GRA**), who ultimately provide games with an age rating based upon their

review of the game (and its content) in accordance with the PEGI system. You can read more about how the GRA examines and rates games according to the PEGI system here. The PEGI system is recognised globally, and it is used and recognised in more than 35 countries across Europe (a list of which you can find here), not just in the UK.

The PEGI system has 5 age-related categories, which you can read about in depth here. To briefly summarise the PEGI age categories, they are:
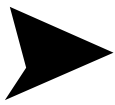
PEGI AGE RATINGS

Category	Description
3 www.pegi.info	Suitable for those aged three and above
7 www.pegi.info	Suitable for those aged seven and above
12 www.pegi.info	Suitable for those aged twelve and above
16 www.pegi.info	Suitable for those aged sixteen and above
18 www.pegi.info	Suitable for those aged eighteen and above

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As you will see from the above, a PEGI 7 game will only be suitable for those aged seven and above, while a PEGI 18-rated game will only be suitable for adults aged 18 and above. PEGI 18 games are rated at that level for a reason. Their content will likely be just as unsuitable for a child as an 18-rated film.

You'll be pleased to know that if certain content is included in a game, such as illegal drugs, alcohol or tobacco, that game should automatically receive either a PEGI 16 or 18 rating, regardless as to how prominently those elements are depicted in the game.

As mentioned above, PEGI ratings are double tiered in the sense that they can also include "content descriptors". The use of content descriptors such as those shown below alongside age-ratings mean that you can more readily understand how a game has been awarded its age-rating. That should give you a better idea as to whether a game is suitable for you (or a family member) or not.

The PEGI content descriptors are as follows, and you can read more about them here:

▶ **PEGI CONTENT DESCRIPTORS**

It is essential to understand that not all games are made for children. Some games are perfect for all ages, some are suitable for children, some are suitable for teenagers, and others are absolutely adult in theme. There is a PEGI app available which allows users to search the PEGI database for up-to-date video game rating classifications and filter results by age rating, genre

and platform (amongst other things). The app also provides detailed instructions on how to set up parental controls across a range of devices. You can read more about the PEGI app (and download it) by clicking here.

The age ratings provided by PEGI are intended to be a guide, and parents and guardians will still have to make their own decisions in the home about what is suitable. You may feel, for example, that due to an experience, a 12-rated game will not be appropriate for your 13-year-old child. By becoming more familiar with how the ratings work and the games your children are playing, you will be better able to judge suitability and the level of parental controls required.

THE BRITISH BOARD OF FILM CLASSIFICATION (BBFC)

Some video game titles may feature the British Board of Film Classification (**BBFC**) rating logo, as seen on films (see above). Whilst some games were in the past subject to regulation by the BBFC, a review carried out in 2008 concluded that the dual system of PEGI ratings for some games and a BBFC rating for other games was confusing to parents. Therefore, in 2012 the government designated the Video Standards Council (**VSC**) as the body with responsibility for rating video games in the UK, using the PEGI system. In 2023, the VSC changed its operating name to the Games Rating Authority (**GRA**) to make the organisation's main purpose clearer.

The BBFC also advise the GRA on the classification of linear video footage contained in games which is not integral to the game, helping the latter to reach an overall PEGI classification for the game. This includes advising on linear video content which doesn't contribute towards a game's narrative – for example: rewards and video content in games which are designed to be viewed in their own right (where that content doesn't advance the narrative of the game).

As with the PEGI ratings, BBFC ratings can provide helpful guidance for parents when making decisions about appropriate content. More information on the BBFC rating system can be found here.

APP STORE AGE RATINGS

Video games are increasingly available to download as apps via platforms such as Apple's App Store, the Nintendo eShop, the Google Play Store and the Microsoft Store. To advise parents on which apps and games are appropriate for their child, app platforms generally present age ratings which are visible on digital storefronts before a game is downloaded. However, as mentioned earlier, some platforms don't require age ratings to be made visible on their digital storefronts, so be sure to check the relevant age rating and content of any game prior to making a purchase.

Some app stores, such as the Microsoft Store, the Nintendo eShop and the Google Play Store, require developers to obtain an age rating from the International Age Rating Coalition (**IARC**). An IARC rating is required before a developer can start selling their game on that digital store, and the store owner displays the rating generated by the IARC system to consumers in the digital storefront before they purchase the game. In the UK, an age rating generated via the IARC system will show as a PEGI rating (as that is the rating-system that has been adopted by the UK).

IARC ratings are only available for digital products listed in participating online storefronts, and not every online app store is signed up to the IARC regime. To obtain an age rating via IARC, game developers complete a questionnaire about the game's content and submit that online. An age rating is then assigned to their game via an automated process, and that age rating is based upon an analysis of the international standards for different territories across the globe (so in the UK, the age rating is assigned according to the PEGI standards that we have adopted, and a PEGI age-rating is then assigned to the game based upon an assessment of its content). It is important to note that PEGI has the right to amend any age rating generated by the IARC system upon review, if it feels that the generated age rating is not suitable.

With that in mind, for storefronts that require an IARC rating prior to sale on their platforms, it should be the case that a PEGI rating will appear on the digital listing page for the game prior to purchase.

The Apple App Store utilises its own rating system that is independent from PEGI, and therefore apps that are purchased via the App Store may not bear a PEGI age-rating (as will be the case on other platforms). However, they will still have an age-rating generated by Apple's own system. As is the case with IARC, an Apple age rating is typically determined based on a developer's submissions relating to the content in the game (the developer again filling out a questionnaire relating to in-game content).

Games that are listed in the App Store digital storefront are rated according to 4 different categories. Apple reports that its age-ratings bands can be compared to the PEGI system as follows:

**APPLE AND
PEGI AGE-
RATINGS BANDS**

APPLE RATING	PEGI RATING
4+	3+
N/A	7+
9+	None
12+	12+
17+	16+
Unrated (not available on the App Store)	18+

You can get further information about each age-category for the Apple App Store here.

HEALTH
BENEFITS

There are numerous benefits to playing games, and while simple escapism from reality for a period can be particularly helpful for a person's mental health, games can also educate, improve social skills, connect families, offer physical health benefits, engage children with creativity and literacy, and inspire remarkably rewarding careers (see below).

However, everything should of course be done in moderation, as many activities enjoyed to excess can be bad for you – and video games are no exception. Sometimes a long gaming session can be rewarding, but when it comes at the expense of work, study, sleep, eating, socialising or physical activity, there may well be a problem that need to be addressed.

All in all, video games should be enjoyed as part of a balanced lifestyle, as that is when they deliver the most benefit to us. Professional esports players may play for extended periods of time or more regularly than casual players but, as a result, they and their teams should approach their gameplay with particular care as to their physical health.

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As referred to above, the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health suggests that it is 'impossible' to recommend age-appropriate time limits for screen time. With that in mind, they urge parents to approach screen time based on the child's development age and individual need'. It is therefore important that as parents and guardians, we can recognise when our children's screen time may be detrimental, and that we take steps to prevent that from impacting on their health and wellbeing.

With regards to health, some specific points should be noted, particularly in relation to use of hardware (the computers and consoles that we play games on). For example, Nintendo warns that children under the age of six should avoid using the 3D feature on the Nintendo 3DS console (as a result of concerns regarding vision damage), and various manufacturers warn about youngsters using some virtual reality (VR) headsets.

Different manufacturers have different age recommendations for VR headsets, but general advice is that children should be monitored and take regular breaks. Some specific manufacturer guidelines are set out below:

- Samsung Gear VR: The Gear VR should not be used by children under the age of 13.

- Google Cardboard: Google does not specify an age, but they do advise that Cardboard is not for use by children without adult supervision.

- Sony PlayStation VR: The VR headset is not for use by children under the age of 12.

- Google Daydream View: Daydream View should not be used by children under the age of 13.

- Oculus Meta Quest: Meta does not specify an age, but they do advise that the Meta Quest is not recommended for use by younger or smaller-sized children or if the headset cannot be adjusted to fit properly.

VR involves 'immersive technology' that engages your body and eyes – because children are still growing and developing, you're advised to limit their time using VR.

A parent's guide to VR gaming published by the NSPCC can be found here.

Today, there is increasing evidence that playing video games can have health benefits to children and adults alike. For example,

research has found that playing video games can:

- Bring therapeutic advantages to youngsters, improve motor skills, better vision, provide pain relief, and even bolster happiness in the elderly

- Improve children's social skills and developing intelligence

- Boost productivity in the office when played as team.

- Reduces reaction time, improves hand-eye co-ordination and raises players' self-esteem

- Increase perception and memory

- Overcome dyslexia

- Help with weight loss and taking up sports

- Help treat depression

- Improve cognitive functioning

- Boost creativity.

A common criticism of video games is that their sometimes-violent content can drive real-world aggression. However, recent research shows violent video game engagement is not associated with adolescents' aggressive behaviour. Dr Tanya Byron's high profile government-commissioned report Safer Children in a Digital World – otherwise known as The Byron Review – also found no causal link between playing violent video games and violence in real life.

ONLINE GAMES AND ONLINE SAFETY

Increasingly, video games use the power of the internet to offer more features. Games on consoles, computers, mobile phones and those played through websites can all be "internet connected" games.

In the simplest cases, a game is connected to the internet so that the company that made the game (the developer) or the company that publishes the game (the publisher) can update it remotely. These types of updates might add new levels or content, fix errors in the game that have been found, or make other small tweaks.

Additionally, some games use an internet connection to sell digital items, and this is referred to later in this guide under the heading "Free-to-Play" and "In-App Purchases".

However, probably the most significant way that an internet connection is used in games is to allow communities to play together. This often takes the form of "online multiplayer" modes, when anything from a handful of players to hundreds of users tackle a game simultaneously.

The players may be working together to beat a game, competing against each other, or even enjoying individual experiences in an online world where most of the game characters they meet are real people also playing the game. Players can also use this kind of connectivity to simply watch others play, effectively making them spectators.

Many online multiplayer games allow players chat to each other while playing, either with a microphone, or using written text. Sometimes the other players will be selected personal friends, but in many cases many people you play with in an online game will be a stranger.

Connected games can bring all kinds of opportunities, from simply offering better experiences, to building communities that can learn, create and share the many benefits playing games can bring. However, connecting with strangers on the internet can bring real dangers, from cyberbullying to grooming. Where online chat in games is concerned, other players can often say what they want, uncensored; that might mean exposure to content that is adult in theme, abusive or offensive.

Many game companies across the world recognise their responsibility to protect their online users, and most games will have an "End-User Licence Agreement" (**EULA**) that sets out the rules that apply to the playing of a particular game or expectations regarding player interactions. Users identified as harassing, bullying or grooming other players can be reported to the game company, possibly to be banned or blocked because of being in breach of the game's EULA. Additionally, large online game companies typically have teams dedicated to policing their digital worlds. In the UK, we have gone one step further to try to protect people from the potential harms of the

internet and digital connectivity by introducing new laws.

On October 26, 2023, the UK introduced the Online Safety Act 2023 (the '**OSA**'). Whilst the OSA didn't specifically target video games and the people that make them, many gaming businesses that make online games will now be subject to the provisions of the OSA.

The intention of the OSA is to make the internet (and by extension, video games that have a connectivity element) a safer place for those who use it. Games that have the following types of functionalities are going to be covered by the OSA:

• Text/voice chat
• The creation of user-generated content
• Online communal spaces (such as the Metaverse)

It is important to note that the full effect of the OSA won't be felt until late-2025, but we expect that future games with functionality such as those stated above will have a greater degree of content moderation from the developers/publishers (which will involve actively monitoring and removing illegal and harmful content).

Additionally, we can expect to see a shift towards more in-game reporting procedures, allowing players to report illegal and harmful content more readily whilst playing. We are also likely to see artificial intelligence (AI) play a greater role in protecting online users in the coming years.

However, there is so much a parent can do at home to ensure that children stay safe when consuming games that have a connective element to them. The most important thing is to keep talking to your children about the games they play. Please don't just talk about dangers and restrictions: talk about the fun they are having, the games they are enjoying, and what they have been getting up to in online worlds.

Having those friendly, casual and enthusiastic conversations will make it easier for your child to talk to you when there are problems – and easier for you to get your child to listen when you need a serious discussion about games that they are playing.

It also may be comforting to know that children are being taught about staying safe online in school, better equipping them to recognise potential safety concerns more readily and report them to the appropriate people. The Government's guide on teaching online safety in schools can be found here.

For information on what parents can do to keep their child safe online, see our "Tips for Parents" section above.

FREE TO PLAY GAMES AND IN-APP PURCHASES

To play games, you will generally be required to make a payment. However, the way in which developers and publishers are obtaining payment in respect of games and their content has somewhat changed in the past few years. It is important that as consumers of games, we can recognise the difference between the most common types of "monetisation" models currently adopted by games companies.

Traditionally, games were sold by requiring one upfront fee, which is paid when the customer is purchasing a game. This was usually done over the counter at a shop. After buying the game, no further payments are required. This model does still exist, both with boxed physical releases, and with downloadable games. Today, games that are sold at a specific price point for a one-off fee are known as "premium" games.

Increasingly though, it is easy to find games that are available to be downloaded for "free". However, whilst the initial download of the game is free, these types of games are often monetised by offering "in-app purchases" (**IAPs**), which players are able to make at their discretion. This model is called "free-to-play", which is often shortened to "F2P".

One of the most common methods for monetising games via IAPs sees players able to progress through the game faster by spending some real money. For example, a game may ask for payment to acquire extra lives, to use more powerful characters, to fast forward a timer preventing a player's progress, or to buy fictional "in-game currency" that can then be used to acquire certain in-game abilities.

F2P games can be of great value to consumers and developers alike. This is because the F2P business model allows consumers to play extremely high-quality games entirely free, without actually having to spend any money (unless they feel that they want to).

Importantly, a report published by TIGA in 2013 showed that typically 95 per cent of consumers playing a F2P game don't spend any money at all, with only 5% of users of free games spending any money on IAPs. Whilst our report is from 2013, these figures appear to have remained consistent, according to more recent statistics.

Whilst F2P games are seemingly enjoyed by most without any further purchases being made, what cannot be overstated is just how easy it can be to spend large amounts of money over time on F2P games.

It is not unknown for children – innocently or otherwise – to spend significant sums of their parents' money on a game that is understood by those adults to be "free". This often happens when

parents give their children their device passwords and thus the ability to make purchases without first seeking parental approval. Parents and guardians should avoid giving their children their device passwords, to prevent unauthorised spending.

Another thing to look out for in F2P games is a concept known as "dark patterns". The phrase is used to describe a number of intentionally deceptive user interfaces/features, which are designed to influence players' choices whilst they are consuming games. In F2P games, certain types of dark patterns are sometimes used to encourage players to make in-app purchases.

Some examples of dark patterns may include: (i) countdown timers that create a sense of urgency to make in-app purchases; (ii) pay-to-skip, which relies on users making purchases to bypass certain elements of the game; and (iii) the "roach motel", where users are able to get into a position with relative ease (such as a monthly subscription for certain content), but then find it particularly difficult to get out of that position (using the example above, it may be that it is tricky and time consuming to exit a subscription that a consumer has entered into, the intention being that instead of going through the difficult process, they simply allow it to continue). Dark patterns are something that regulators across the world are paying more and more attention to.

The UK's regulator, the Competition & Markets Authority (**CMA**) continues to actively investigate the use of dark patterns (or "online choice architecture", as it is more officially known) generally. With the EU's Digital Services Act already addressing some consumer protection issues (including dark patterns) and a high profile US case regarding dark patterns, we might see some further regulations/guidelines introduced in the UK that have the effect of covering such use in games.

However, it is important to recognise that the video games industry already adheres to high standards in relation to consumer protection. Back in April 2014, the CMA published Principles for online and app-based games, and these principles are intended to act as a guide for games companies to use in-app purchases in a responsible way. The Principles aren't new law in this area, but they do set out the CMA's view on how current consumer protection laws apply to video game developers and their use of in-app purchases. Therefore, games companies who sell to consumers in the UK will be expected to comply with those principles, otherwise the CMA may investigate them further and take the appropriate action.

To expand upon the Principles a little more, they were developed after extensive consultation with TIGA, games businesses and other interested parties. They look to ensure that consumers,

particularly children, are protected from commercially dubious practices.

The eight principles can be summarised as follows:

1. The costs associated with playing should be clear, accurate and displayed "prominently up-front" before a consumer plays, downloads or signs up/makes a purchase.

2. All other material information about a game should also be clear, accurate and displayed "prominently up-front" before a consumer plays, downloads or signs up/makes a purchase.

3. Information about the business that makes the game should also be provided to the consumer, including whom they ought to contact in case of queries.

4. In-game promotion of extra paid-for content and the promotion of other products or services should be clear and distinguishable from gameplay, and the explanation should be tailored to the consumer's age.

5. A game should not give a false impression that payments are required or are an integral part of the way a game is played if that is incorrect.

6. Games should not include aggressive practices, or those otherwise having the potential to exploit children's inexperience, vulnerability or credulity.

7. A game should not include direct exhortations to children to make a purchase or persuade others to make a purchase for them.

8. Payments should not be taken from the payment account holder unless authorised. A payment made in a game is not authorised unless express, informed consent for that payment has been given by the account holder.

The CMA has also published a short guide providing advice to parents and carers about F2P Games, which can be found here.

The guide's main point is that you should be able to recognise that a game marketed as "free" may allow IAPs, which means that it is not necessarily totally free to play. The more that consumers and children are educated about the use of dark patterns, the more readily players can identify if they might be used to encourage our decisions whilst playing games. Being educated about what dark patterns are, and being able to spot them, will allow you and your family to consume games in the manner that you want to (whether that includes making in-app purchases or not).

GAMING DISORDER

On 3 June 2019, TIGA issued a press release following the World Health Organisation's inclusion of "gaming-disorder" in the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) as an officially recognised illness. You can find the press release here.

As background, on 18 June 2018, the World Health Organisation (**WHO**) published a classification of a new "gaming disorder" in their International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11). As defined by the WHO, a gaming disorder is:

• "A pattern of gaming behaviour (digital-gaming or video-gaming) characterised by impaired control over gaming, increasing priority given to gaming over other activities to the extent that gaming takes precedence over other interests and daily activities, and continuation or escalation of gaming despite the occurrence of negative consequences."

For "gaming disorder" to be diagnosed, the WHO stated:

• "The behaviour pattern must be of sufficient severity to result in significant impairment in personal, family, social, educational, occupational or other important areas of functioning and would normally have been evident for at least 12 months."

For more details, please visit: who.int/features/qa/gaming-disorder/en

It is important to note that the WHO believes that only a minority of gamers suffer from "gaming disorder":

• "Studies suggest that gaming disorder affects only a small proportion of people who engage in digital- or video-gaming activities. However, people who partake in gaming should be alert to the amount of time they spend on gaming activities, particularly when it is to the exclusion of other daily activities, as well as to any changes in their physical or psychological health and social functioning that could be attributed to their pattern of gaming behaviour."

Several academics and healthcare professionals publicly disagreed with the WHO's classification, saying it lacked consensus and could lead to misdiagnosis or stigmatisation of gamers. For example: theverge.com/2018/6/19/17479318/gaming-disorder-who-psychology-video-games-science

Studies estimate between 0.3-1 per cent of the general population might qualify for a potential acute diagnosis of internet gaming disorder. Some studies suggest that gaming disorder is a symptom of underlying attention related mental health issues, rather than a unique phenomenon.

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For examples of such studies, please see:

- Internet Gaming Disorder: Investigating the Clinical Relevance of a New Phenomenon
- Scholars' open debate paper on the World Health Organization ICD-11 Gaming Disorder proposal
- Video games and mental health: "Nobody's properly talking"

What to do if you think you or a loved one game too much

If you believe gaming is constantly getting in the way of yours or a loved one's work, study, sleep, eating, socialising or physical activity, there may well be a problem that needs addressing.

Please seek professional medical advice from the NHS.

Audible advantage! Looking after the vital third sense that gives gamers a competitive edge

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HearAngel provide hearing safeguarding software solutions to hearable manufacturers for integration with their products. HearAngel.com

Keen gamers will understand the importance of sound in a gaming environment; hearing is a vital sense to provide a competitive edge alongside visual cues and haptic feedback. However, exposure to loud audio for too long a time, especially through headphones, can damage hearing permanently. Here we provide some tips to help gamers protect their hearing through safeguarding and so continue to have a gaming advantage.

Whatever the game genre, audio plays an important role, and our physiology means that we are able to act faster to sounds than visual cues. Whether hearing spells being cast in the fog of war in a multiplayer online battle arena, or hearing and locating footsteps or the loading and switching of guns in a first-person shooter, sound cues can provide big advantage to those able to act on them. Hearing acuity is vitally important for gamers who wish to perform at the highest standard; it doesn't matter how good their eyesight is nor how fast their fingers are if their hearing is compromised. Protection of this vital sense through safeguarding is essential for all players.

The World Health Organisation (**WHO**) have identified that more than 1.1 billion young people globally are at risk of avoidable hearing loss due to recreational exposure to loud sound, the biggest cause of which is the use of headphones, especially with the increasing exposure from gaming use. They are addressing the

issue with an awareness campaign and the creation of standards for headphone manufacturers to help users make informed choices to limit hearing damage.

The WHO recommend no more than 80dBA (average level) over a 24 hour period (or 80 dB for 40 hours per week for adults, 75 dB for children). This means that it is possible to listen to louder noises for some of the time, as long as this is offset by periods where the noise levels are lower or you are not listening to loud noises at all.

Here are some tips to help look after hearing:

- Limit the volume at which you listen, to the minimum possible.
- Try to avoid wearing headphones for extended periods without a break; wherever possible take regular "listening" time-outs.
- Use the highest quality audio encoding possible; high-definition audio and 3D audio enhancements often allow listening at lower volumes without any loss of detail compared to lower quality audio.
- If you are in a noisy environment, use Active Noise Cancellation headphones which allow listening at lower levels rather than trying to turn up the volume to drown out background noise.
- For parents, ensure that your children's headphone usage is limited in time and that they are listening at as low a volume as possible (see next point). Consider imposing a maximum listening time per day as well as an evening curfew.
- Use headphones that include hearing safeguarding technology. Read any provided information about sound exposure over time that allows informed listening decisions to be made to protect hearing.

Gamers wishing to optimise their performance and gain a competitive advantage should follow the above steps and look to use the very best performing intelligent headphones that incorporate high quality, 3D audio and the appropriate hearing safeguarding.

Useful Links

- WHO on hearing loss:
  who.int/health-topics/hearing-loss

- WHO Make Listening Safe campaign:
  who.int/activities/making-listening-safe

- WHO-ITU standard for hearing safeguarding:
  who.int/publications/i/item/safe-listening-devices-and-systems-a-who-itu-standard

LOOT BOXES

The monetisation of games is something that is constantly evolving. There are now several monetisation models available to developers, including (amongst others) free-to-play, subscription fees, season/battle passes and rewarded advertising/media.

However, the monetisation model that has attracted the most attention, and indeed the most scrutiny, is loot boxes. Loot boxes are randomised mechanisms that are contained within games that allow players to pay for the opportunity to open a "digital box" to receive a randomly allocated in-game "item".

The major draw of loot boxes is that the items that are available to players within them usually have a varying degree of rarity. This essentially means that by opening loot boxes, players are paying for the opportunity of potentially obtaining a rare and desirable item that can be used within the game.

The Government identified a range of potential harms associated with the purchase of paid loot boxes. The Department for Digital, Culture Media & Sport (**DCMS**) convened an industry Technical Working Group to pursue enhanced industry-led solutions to mitigate the risk of harm for children, young people and adults from paid loot boxes in video games. DCMS published its 2022 response to the call for evidence on loot boxes in video games.

Guidance regarding paid Loot Boxes was published in July 2023. A set of 11 principles were produced to help ensure that those game businesses that use paid loot boxes adopt responsible practices that protect children and young people, from the risks associated with paid loot boxes. The principles were devised by a Technical Working Group convened by the DCMS in response to a call for evidence to pursue enhanced industry-led solutions, to which TIGA and its members contributed.

The principles of paid loot boxes, supported by examples of good practice, capture the following:

- Detail ways in which technological controls can restrict the purchase of paid loot boxes by those under 18 and how such controls are implemented across platforms;
- Encourage greater awareness of parental controls to increase their uptake by players;
- Increase player understanding of paid loot boxes with clear information and probability disclosures to allow consumers to make informed decisions;
- Provide clear guidance on the design and marketing of paid loot boxes with clear signposting of information for consumer redress and implementation of fair refund policies.

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TIGA had already published its set of voluntary Principles for Safeguarding Players in 2020. These principles set out several good practices, including responsible spending and time management measures.

Ultimately, those who make video games will be expected to take action to ensure that loot boxes are consumed in a safe and appropriate manner by consumers. However, there are still steps that consumers of games can take to ensure that they stay safe where loot boxes are concerned.

It's important to be able to recognise when a game may have loot boxes as a feature (look out for the "In-Game Purchases" content descriptor referred to earlier) and take action accordingly to prevent the risk of harm occurring.

For children, that might include monitoring and restricting their access to payment mechanisms, and for adults, that may involve further understanding and education about loot boxes so that more informed decisions can be made prior to purchasing.

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