

Beyond the Video Game Nasties: Censorship and the Online Safety Act

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Since key provisions of the Online Safety Act came into force on 25 July 2025, the legislation has emerged as a central regulatory framework for video games in the United Kingdom. The Act establishes a new duty of care for online platforms, ostensibly targeting “illegal content and activity” and “content and activity that is harmful to children”. Although the Act is formally UK-focused and not directed specifically at video games, its implications reach deeply into the games sector – particularly moderation of user communication and user-generated content – and extend well beyond the UK’s borders, as international developers, platforms and digital storefronts fall within the Act’s scope if their games and services are available to users in the UK. This paper situates the Online Safety Act within the UK’s history of regulation and censorship, using it as a contemporary lens to examine how national policies exert transnational influence and raise enduring concerns that regulatory regimes disproportionately over-police marginalised creators and communities.

The Online Safety Act has drawn extensive criticism, spanning political, industrial, and activist perspectives. Public consultation responses, a Wikimedia Foundation judicial review, the U.S. Department of State’s Human Rights Practices report, and a widely circulated “Repeal the Online Safety Act” petition all raise concerns. One of the most compelling critiques, however, turns to what Judson et al. describe as the corporate “bypass strategy.” (2024) They argue that platforms may over-implement the law to avoid regulatory risk, potentially restricting freedom of expression far more than the statute demands. While this has previously been both a national issue of over-implementation and an issue of market censorship and risk-aversion, new legislation bridges the two in novel and potentially troubling ways, with implications that extend across digital markets and communities.

These contemporary concerns echo a longer history of regulation and censorship in the UK, where mechanisms for controlling culture have long shaped the reception and development of games. As Mathews (1994) notes, “censorship as a way of filtering culture lies at the core of English custom,” reflecting a coercive societal tradition that has regulated games (from skittles to football) alongside literature, theatre, and film. The UK’s early adoption of age-based ratings for video games in 1986, a world first, was a direct response to the ‘video nasties’ moral panic of the 1980s (Petley 2011) and reflects a unique national context marked by the UK development culture of the

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1980s (Wade 2016), tabloid-driven moral outrage, and Thatcherist entrepreneurialism. At the same time, it is shaped by international technological advancements, broader regulatory changes, as well as rising concerns about video game violence. These dynamics not only illuminate the UK's long-standing regulatory trajectory but also set the stage for understanding the contemporary environment in which video game governance now operates.

This paper traces the parallel evolution of governmental and supranational regulation that develop in tandem with expanding forms of corporate censorship enabled by an increasingly concentrated distribution oligopoly. From the beginning of video games ratings by the British Board of Film Classification and the idiosyncratic development of the first 18-rated video game – 1987's *Jack the Ripper* – to the policing of queer communities in online gaming spaces (Kelley 2012; Shaw 2012) the paper also highlights how intersectional identities have been both erased from gaming history and subjected to disproportionate regulation. Censorship regimes may evolve as power shifts from individual censors to algorithms, and from governments to self-censorship by the games industry and then platforms and digital storefronts, while the targets of outrage and offence continue to change. Nevertheless, enduring regulatory infrastructures, as made evident by Ofcom's enforcement of the Online Safety Act, as well as persistent discourses, particularly around the notion of "harm," remain constant. The control of intersectional pleasures is also a consistent feature of media and games censorship, whether it is the inevitable collateral of overregulation or, frequently, the result of explicit regulatory design.

In light of this broader history of gaming censorship, the Online Safety Act is understood not as a radical departure but as an evolution of these entangled traditions, and a point of collision between government and corporate interventions, wherein the legislative measure "endangers users' freedom of expression by incentivising the over-removal of speech." (Judson et al. 2024)

Ultimately, the paper contends that classification and regulatory frameworks play a central role in cultural governance, shaping public perception, industry practice, and the experiences of creators and communities both within and beyond the UK.

Keywords

Censorship, video game regulation, historical analysis, Online Safety Act, queer studies

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