



ONLINE COMPUTER GAMES: YOUTH PROTECTION AND INFORMATION ON IN-GAME SALES ARE FOUND TO BE INSUFFICIENT

14 popular online computer games probed: A study conducted by Market Watch Digital World examines user information and customer service

Mainz/Berlin, August 19, 2019 – In a recent study the Market Watch team of the Consumer Association in Rhineland-Palatinate (Verbraucherzentrale Rheinland-Pfalz) examined 14 online computer games.* They came to the conclusion that, particularly for parents, it is virtually impossible to find information on both in-game sales and age-appropriateness for their children. The Market Watch experts screened online game providers to determine whether they provide all relevant information on their game sites as well as how customer services reacted to various inquiries.

The Market Watch team found that all 14 online computer games surveyed accepted real money in exchange for game currency, digital extras or both. None of the providers clearly informed players about this on their website, neither prior to game purchases nor upon registration. There is either absolutely no detectable information on in-game sales options on the online game's websites (five of 14 surveyed games), or information can only be found once users are familiar with the game, knowing, for example, the name of the respective currency (nine of 14).

“Before purchasing a game, players and, more specifically, their parents must have easy access to information concerning additional costs that may arise during the game. Otherwise, they may suffer a rude awakening,” warns Christine Korn, statistic advisor at the Market Watch Digital World team within the Consumer Association of Rhineland-Palatinate. “The absence or inaccessibility of such vital information is not acceptable.”

IN-GAME EXTRAS PURCHASED BY MINORS ARE RARELY REIMBURSED

In-game purchases made by minors without a parent's consent are legally void. However, when parents request refunds for unauthorized purchases, the study reveals that customer services procedures are far from uniform: Some providers reimburse funds, some do not. Some providers refer parents to the sales platform

or do not react to inquiries at all. “Essentially, it’s up to parents to ensure their children do not purchase expensive in-game extras. Some games allow restrictions to be made in the game settings,” Korn explains.

UNREGULATED AGE RATINGS

The examined online computer games fail to provide a uniform age rating. Some providers (six of 14) display the German USK Logo (German Entertainment Software Self-Regulation Body) while others use the U.S. American entertainment software rating board (ESRB). During the period under review, three game sites were completely devoid of age rating.

On CDs and DVDs, as well as other physical media, game publishers are legally obligated to clearly display an age rating. The same obligation does not apply to online games.

“The age rating law is a remnant of analog days. Online game providers should also be legally obligated to clearly denote and USK rating,” demands Carola Elbrecht, Market Watch Digital World legal advisor at the Federation of German Consumer Organisations. “There must also be uniform labelling requirements for in-game purchase options, as it has been common practice for game apps.”

CUSTOMER SERVICE – SOME ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT

The Market Watch practical test of online computer games pointed out that, for the most part, providers reacted quickly and helpfully to users’ inquiries. Others, however, certainly needed improvement. Furthermore, providers often fail to comply with cancellation rights and general terms and conditions. Complete study results can be accessed here: <https://www.marktwaechter.de/digitale-welt/marktbeobachtung/pc-spiele-im-praxistest>

REPORT COMPLAINTS TO MARKET WATCH

Users who are negatively impacted by online games for computers, consoles or smartphones can lodge their complaints with Market Watch using [this portal](#).

Methodology

The Market Watch team at the Consumer Association of Rhineland-Palatinate examined 14 online computer games. Both free and fee-based games were included in the study. The study encompassed inquiries into the availability of user information on game provider websites (such as age ranking and in-game purchase options) prior to the purchase. Customer service procedures and quality were also examined. Data compilation ensued between November 2018 and April 2019. Detailed information on the methodology used can be found in the report.

* The following computer games were examined: Call of Duty: WWII, Dota 2, FIFA 19, Fortnite: Battle Royale, GTA 5, Hearthstone, League of Legends, Minecraft, PUBG, Realm Royale, Rocket League, Tom Clancy’s Rainbow Six Siege, Warframe and World of Tanks.

Digital World Market Watch:

Digital World Market Watch is an early warning system used by vzbv and the German consumer associations to monitor and analyse the digital market from the consumer's perspective. Its work is based on consumer complaints, empirical studies and an interactive online portal. The Market Watch "Digital World" project also supports the work of supervisory and regulatory authorities such as the German Federal Network Agency (BNetzA). Digital World Market Watch is made up of five local consumer associations, each of which focuses on a specific area of the digital market: Bavaria – digital services, Brandenburg – digital purchasing, North Rhine-Westphalia – user-generated content, Rhineland-Palatinate – digital goods, Schleswig-Holstein – telecommunication services. The Market Watch "Digital World" project receives funding from the German Federal Ministry of Justice and Consumer Protection (BMJV). <http://www.marktwaechter.de/digitalewelt> (in German only)

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