



MARKET CHECK ON ONLINE COMPUTER GAMES

Do insufficient information and poor customer service spoil the fun?



In 2018, 34 million users in Germany played computer games*. As popular as they may be, yet there are numerous consumer issues, as complaints in the Consumer Associations' early warning system reveal. These issues include insufficient information prior to game purchase, expensive in-game purchases by minors, withdrawal problems and poor customer service.

In a qualitative study, the “Market Watch Digital World” project at the Consumer Association of Rhineland-Palatinate tested seven free and seven fee-based games.** The study examined information that is relevant for consumers from the websites of the games such as in-game purchasing, age ratings or the right to withdrawal. Customer services of the game websites were also contacted with diverse consumer issues and their responses assessed.

...❖ NO INFORMATION ON IN-GAME PURCHASING OPTIONS

In all 14 surveyed games, real money could be used as game currency or to buy extra content. However, none of the game sites offered transparent information on options for in-game sales. When asked directly, most customer services providers (11 of 14) admitted that real money could be spent during the game. A uniform marking of possible in-game sales, which is common practice among game apps, does not exist for online computer games so far.

...❖ TOUGH LUCK! WHEN MINORS BUY IN-GAME EXTRAS

None of the surveyed online games displayed reliable, easily recognizable youth protection mechanisms for in-game purchasing. A single entry of payment data at an initial stage (i.e. when buying the game) can make countless further purchases possible. However, when minors spend high sums on in-game purchases without their parents' consent, the sales contract is null and void. In many cases, though, when parents request reimbursement for unauthorized sales, providers refused to pay. Moreover inconsistent customer service reactions to three similar inquiries were found – some paid, some did not. Evidently, reimbursement procedures are arbitrary instead of systematic.

...❖ INCONSISTENT AGE RATING

Less than half of the examined game websites (six of 14) provide age rating according to the German Entertainment Software Self-Regulation Body (USK). Five of them have only the U.S. American entertainment software rating board (ESRB) age rating. During the period under review, three of the game websites had no age rating at all. Online game providers are not obligated to set an age rating on games that are distributed solely online. This law only applies when the same version of the game is also sold on physical media.

Nearly all providers (11 of 14) ask the player's age upon registering for or buying the game, but only one requires verification beyond simply entering the date of birth or confirming the minimum age. These measures are easy to circumvent.

...❖ CUSTOMER SERVICE: ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT AT SOME PROVIDERS

With a few exceptions, game providers reacted to consumer inquiries within 24 to 48 hours, and offered useful, satisfying responses. Some customer services, however, completely ignored some or all inquiries and two providers responded only in English. There were also instances where customer services gave three different answers to three similar questions.

Detailed study content and methodology under:
<https://www.marktwaechter.de/digitale-welt/marktbeobachtung/pc-spiele-im-praxistest>

*Source: Statista, Number of computer game players in Germany from 2013 to 2019

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

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ONLINE COMPUTER GAMES – INCONSISTENT AGE RATING

There is a lack of mandatory rules for age rating.



Games studied: 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.

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Source: „Market check on online computer games: Do insufficient information and poor customer service spoil the fun?“ – A study carried out by the Market Watch Digital World project, August 2019.

Methodology: The age rating data of games examined was compiled via one-time website research between November 2018 and April 2019.

IN-GAME PURCHASES: INFORMATION UNDETECTIBLE

There is no obligation to label in-game purchase options.

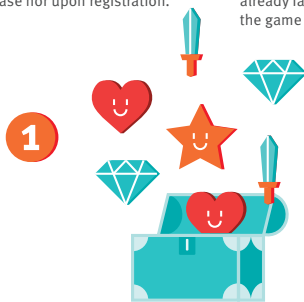


5 of the 14 games

gave absolutely **no detectible information** on game currency or in-game purchase options – neither prior to game purchase nor upon registration.

9 of the 14 games

made information on in-game currency or purchases extremely difficult to research. First when players are already familiar with the game or know the name of the game currency is such information accessible.



All 14 examined games accept real money for game currency and/or extra content.

Games studied: 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.

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Source: „Market check on online computer games: Do insufficient information and poor customer service spoil the fun?“ – A study carried out by the Market Watch Digital World project, August 2019.

Methodology: Information on in-game purchases was compiled via one-time website research between November 2018 and April 2019 and subsequently underwent a qualitative content analysis.

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