

■ What is the history of video game censorship in Singapore? And how was it shaped by public backlash, the video game industry, and international media?

A ■ of key points from my article: <https://t.co/BTiM1epR4X>

1/ Did you know the arcades were banned in Singapore during the 80s?

The moral panic over video game addiction caused a nationwide ban on arcades in 1983 — with arcades having to close up shop while game enthusiasts defended their hobby against parents in newspaper op-eds. <https://t.co/XBBQp70jcg>



2/ Video game enthusiasts were finding creative workarounds, however.

A year later, there were reports of people paying video game stores 2-4\$ an hour to rent computers for games — an early precursor to our LAN shop / internet cafe culture! <https://t.co/09rQIUIKZB>



3/ In the 90s, attention turned towards halting the spread of violent video games.

One of the most well-known casualties of this new censorship regime was Mortal Kombat, with Singapore's Board of Film Censors raiding shops to seize copies of the game. <https://t.co/EGfKhy7QV3>

Singapore's Board of Film Censors has raided three shops in the city-state and confiscated at least 20 copies of the latest version of the game, Mortal Kombat 3. Singapore banned the original and subsequent versions of the game after new censorship guidelines for electronic games showing sadistic and excessive violence were established in 1994. But the recent release in Singapore of a popular movie by the same name has helped make Mortal Kombat 3 one of the most sought-after video games in the tiny island republic. One shopowner in Singapore said his 80 copies of the game were sold quickly last month. The chairman of the Board of Film Censors said the film Mortal Kombat was not violent enough to be banned in Singapore, where many movies and television shows from the West are carefully censored before they are released in the country. Most of the copies of the computer game available in Singapore are pirated and anyone found distributing them faces fines of more than \$14,000 and a maximum jail sentence of six months, the newspaper said.

4/ These raids continued in the 2000s, with the high-profile (and very short-lived) ban of Half-Life.

Public backlash to this was strong, with one fan site organising a petition that gained thousands of signatures. <https://t.co/SzCi06JL0u>

Singapore Bans Half-Life

Island nation's government blasts Valve's Half-Life from store shelves.

By [Amer Ajami](#) on April 26, 2000 at 10:20PM PDT

Earlier this morning, a GameSpot reader in Singapore wrote in with some bad news for gamers in the Southeast Asian island-nation. Apparently, the Singapore Board of Censorships and the Ministry of Arts have banned the sale of Valve Software's Half-Life and all of its associated third-party mods, including Counterstrike, claiming that the game contains too much violence, despite the game's built-in parental lockouts.

The reader claims that government officials have already raided a number of LAN shops, and retailers have been ordered to pull all copies of Half-Life from their shelves. In protest of this action, a local web site has published a petition to the government of Singapore to save the legal sale of Half-Life.

Sierra was unavailable for comment at press time. Our Singapore readers and all concerned gamers should visit the petition, linked to the right.

5/ The most infamous video game ban came in 2007, when Singapore banned Mass Effect because it featured a scene with “lesbian intimacy”.

The ban provoked intense international media coverage and public backlash, and triggered an important reform to SG's censorship regime. <https://t.co/lZbnGytBjF>

Singapore does not want to be viewed as arbitrarily blacklisting games that contain what it judges to be “objectionable” content. Who can forget the uproar last November, when the Media Development Authority (MDA) banned Bioware’s role-playing game, *Mass Effect*, over a blown-out-of-proportion lesbian sex scene?

Amid the indignant howls from the gaming community, the MDA overturned the ban merely a day later, releasing the game under a stopgap M18 rating.

But the damage was done – Singapore was derided as a repressive nation with hair-trigger regulations and anachronistic sensibilities, and local gamers found it hard to hold their heads high within the global gaming league.

The rhetoric against adult-oriented computer game titles is often predicated on the assumption that its sole purpose is titillation. But that is not always the case.

Take *Mass Effect*, for example. The sci-fi game examines mature themes of artificial intelligence, greed and xenophobia, and carries wonderful literary references to poet greats including Walt Whitman and Lord Tennyson. The brief, hazy love scene

6/ This was around the time when Singapore was busy courting video game giants to open up shop in SG, which was one of the Economic Development Board's key priorities in 2008

— and Ubisoft SG's opening was reportedly due to strong support from the gov: <https://t.co/65YoRO4T40>
<https://t.co/YBV2RzNzGI>



7/ Singapore's desire to become a capital of digital media development (<https://t.co/gqs5LyqKkp>) meant that a draconian video game censorship regime did not only make for bad press — it was also bad for business.

8/ So, Singapore introduced its own video game rating system (the first in Southeast Asia).

I genuinely do not envy the playtester going through video games to compile every potentially offensive point into IMDA's classification information. <https://t.co/kPo6SGmNTu>

The player may encounter an implied scene of fellatio between a male character and a non-human, talking towel character, but the act is obscured by a trash bin. The game also contains anime-style images of male characters in suggestive poses and acts of intimacy such as hugging and kissing.

These depictions can be allowed under the M18 guidelines, which permit "Portrayal of sexual activity with some nudity, both topless and frontal, if not detailed", and state that "Homosexual activity should be limited to kissing and hugging." ([IMDA classification information for South Park: The Fractured But Whole](#))

9/ While the new system allowed for games which were previously banned to circulate in Singapore...

... it has also drawn criticism for how it restricts LGBT content and limits the ability of LGBT youth to see themselves in the games that they play: <https://t.co/paiar4TpZ9> <https://t.co/9dw82uB2wU>

Video games only come in two classifications: Advisory 16 (Adv16), which isn't enforceable, and Mature 18 (M18), which is legally enforceable ([page 1, para 5](#)).

Games that contain "homosexual themes" will be given an M18 rating if it's discreet, or refused classification if not ([page 4, para 15a](#); [page 6, para 17dii](#)). If the game features same-sex couples who hug or kiss, they automatically qualify for an M18 rating ([page 5, para 15c](#)).

IMDA almost banned Mass Effect in 2007 for its "homosexual theme" (players are able to form lesbian relationships with another character), but later gave it the M18 rating (aww, how kind of them). They also gave some of the Mass Effect sequels M18 ratings for similar reasons. More recently, IMDA dished out M18 ratings to [Assassin's Creed Odyssey](#) and the [Life is Strange](#) series (amongst other games) partly because players were able to have same-sex intimacy with other characters.

10/ Why is restricting LGBT content bad?

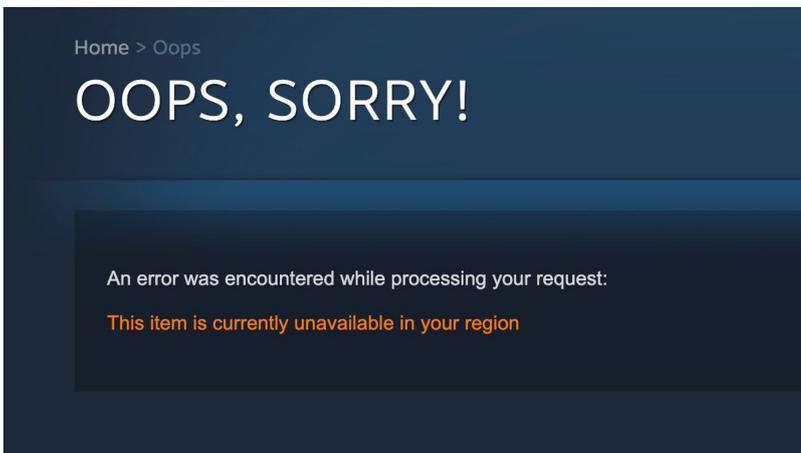
(Among other things,) there is research to show how positive media representations of LGBT people can be an important form of escapism, self-empowerment and community-building for LGBT youth: <https://t.co/Wwk8Wk7BFI>
<https://t.co/9JUM02CgrX>



11/ SG's contradictory censorship regime:

Cyberpunk 2077, a game with customisable genitals and criticised for its transphobia, was given a M18 rating.

Meanwhile, we still don't know why Tell Me Why (the first major video game with a trans protagonist) is restricted in SG.
<https://t.co/Zs1rkTUXhj>



12/ These days, censorship of video games is low-profile, and seems to barely attract local media reporting.

In 2015, Gamasutra broke the story of how civil servants asked a local studio to remove a gay character from their game:
<https://t.co/NAd9GXxkn6>

Local media: ■■■■

13/ Considering the important role of public backlash and outrage in shaping Singapore's regulation of video games, greater awareness about when and how the public was able to provoke change is needed.

At the very least, the state should explain its regulatory decisions.

14/ Overall, Singapore's video game bans were often ineffective and short-lived due to backlash + creative workarounds + the growing industry + sharp media coverage.

Don't like what you see? Demand answers.

If you found this insightful and want more long-form pieces on Singapore's media and politics, consider subscribing (at no cost) to my newsletter here: <https://t.co/FOu01nOBff>