

Are video games 'essential culture'? French lockdown stirs debate

March 23 2021, by Yassine Khiri, Corentin Dautreppe



Game over?: Video games stores in Paris were unsure if they were able to open under the new lockdown

Confusion over France's new partial lockdown has accidentally reignited an old debate: are video games works of art or just another computer product?

France, proud of its long history as a bastion of culture, added book and record stores to its list of essential services allowed to stay open when the lockdown came into force in 16 different regions including Paris on Saturday.

But what about stores selling video games, which were already big business in France and are surging in popularity with so many forced to stay home due to the pandemic?

Following debate among ministers, the government published a decree in its official journal on Saturday authorising the "retail sale of computers, peripheral units and software in specialised stores".

When it came time to open on Monday, some video game stores owners and employees were still unclear on the rules.

Ouri Zagoury said his store in central Paris was open only for customers to collect games they had bought online or to drop off consoles or hardware to be repaired.

"We don't bring people inside, or really even ask for payment," he said.

'Cultural asset'

Vincent, a salesman in a nearby store, said his girlfriend had read media reports that video games had joined book and record stores on the expanded list allowed to stay open.

"We don't really understand anything about this reconfinement," he admitted.

It was not just independent shops struggling to interpret the new rules.

French electronics retail chain FNAC hesitated at first, with YouTube game reviewer Julien Chieze tweeting that the video games sections in its stores were closed on the weekend.



The French spent a record 5.3 billion euros on video games last year

But FNAC director of products Olivier Garcia responded to his tweet on Monday saying the gaming sections had been reopened, citing the government's decree.

Chieze hailed the government's decision, saying: "Yes, video games are a cultural asset just like books and records".

Jacques Creyssel of the FCD retailing federation said "it is true that until now, we were rather uncertain on the subject of video games".

Video gaming centre

After Prime Minister Jean Castex announced on Thursday that book and record stores would be classified as essential, the video game industry lobbied for similar treatment.

Nicolas Vignolles, of the French video game publishers union SELL, told AFP that he "made a lot of calls" in which he said that "the best cultural activity during confinement—especially to keep young people occupied—is playing video games".

He added that "the state of the law means that we can sell video games".

The French spent a record 5.3 billion euros (\$6 billion) on video games last year, according to SELL.

By comparison, the French spent nearly four billion on books, research group GfK said.

France, which is home to major video game publisher Ubisoft among others, has also seen rising interest in eSports.

The former president of the Paris Saint-Germain football club, Robin Leproux, said Monday he would launch what he called Europe's largest video gaming centre.

The 2,000-square-metre (21,500-square-foot) facility in the heart of Paris has a 150-seat arena, 100 computers and 40 consoles, and is already being used by some professional clients.

Called ESpot, it will open to the public "when the health authorities allow us to do so," he told AFP.

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