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Governor targeting violent video games

Blagojevich seeks a law that would bar retailers from allowing anyone younger than 18 to leave their stores with brutal or sexually explicit games

By John Chase and Grace Aduroja, Tribune staff reporters. Game summaries by Eric Gwinn

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One of the hottest video games this Christmas season features characters that indiscriminately maim each other and have sex with prostitutes. But if Gov. Rod Blagojevich has his way, Illinois will be leading a national movement to outlaw the sale or rental to children of games like "Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas."

Blagojevich, who has tried to craft a populist image, will ask the legislature Thursday to make it a misdemeanor for retailers to allow anyone younger than 18 to walk out of their stores with violent or sexually explicit video games.

"Right now a 12-year-old can walk into a store and buy a game with graphic violence, nudity, obscene language and they have no problem obtaining those games," said Abby Ottenhoff, Blagojevich's spokeswoman. "For the video game industry, self-regulation isn't working."

The proposal drew immediate fire from retailers, civil libertarians and those who would be the most personally impacted--kids who play the games.

"It's unfair, you should have whatever games you want," Hammad Ahmed, 12, of Villa Park, said Wednesday as he purchased the popular shoot-'em-up "Halo" at EB Games in Oakbrook Terrace.

Hammad also dismissed studies that claim violence in video games desensitizes children like him to real violence. "Kids aren't that stupid," he insisted. "Like me, I wouldn't go and do that."

The new initiative by Blagojevich fits a pattern the politically ambitious Democrat has established of trying to create a national buzz for himself by championing causes with surefire headline appeal.

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The most prominent of those causes has been his running battle with the Bush administration over its objections, on safety grounds, to the importation of lower-cost prescription drugs. He also has sought permission to buy flu vaccine overseas and has launched a push to purge Illinois schools of junk food.



Blagojevich is scheduled to formally unveil his video game proposal at a news conference in Naperville, where more than a dozen mothers of children in middle school will serve as a backdrop.

Officials with a Naperville school district said the governor's office asked them to arrange the event for Wednesday but then postponed it for a day, in part to accommodate more national media coverage. The governor's office denies the claim.

In injecting himself into the debate over the content of video games, Blagojevich is following a trail blazed by the man he defeated in the 2002 governor's race, former Illinois Atty. Gen. Jim Ryan.

As the state's chief lawyer, Ryan had pressed retailers to impose voluntary curbs on the sale of violent video games to children. Blagojevich's effort goes much further.

A statement from the governor's office said the proposal would define violent games as those that realistically depict human-on-human violence, including images of death, dismemberment, amputation, decapitation, maiming, disfigurement, mutilation of body parts or rape.

Sexually explicit games, the statement said, would be defined as those "realistically depicting male or female genitalia and other nudity exposed in a way that, in accordance with contemporary community standards, predominantly appeals to the prurient interest of the player."

Retailers who sell such games to minors could be charged with a Class A misdemeanor, punishable by up to a year in prison or a \$5,000 fine.

Attempts to crack down on violent and explicit video game sales and rentals in Washington state, St. Louis and elsewhere have been struck down in the court in recent years. But aides to Blagojevich pledged the Illinois version would be written "very narrowly" and could pass legal muster.

Four years ago, Indianapolis passed a law requiring coin-operated video games featuring graphic violence or strong sexual content to be slapped with warning labels, kept 10 feet from other machines and separated by a curtain or wall so minors couldn't see them. Only adults or minors accompanied by a parent or guardian could play.

That law was declared unconstitutional in an opinion written by U.S. Court of Appeals Judge Richard Posner in Chicago, who found that video games, like books, are protected by the 1st Amendment. He said trying to pass laws to protect children from violent descriptions is wrongheaded, noting fairy tales and classics are often filled with violent images.

"To shield children right up to the age of 18 from exposure to violent descriptions and images would not only be quixotic, but deforming," he wrote. "It would leave them unequipped to cope with the world as we know it."

Sexually explicit images are a different story. Even civil libertarians agree that government does have the right to restrict children from seeing such material. But Harvey Grossman, director of the ACLU's Illinois chapter, said laws that adequately accomplish that are already on the books.

Geoffrey Stone, a constitutional law professor at the University of Chicago, said Blagojevich is trying to have the state police something that should be up to parents. "An apt comparison is the lake," Stone said. "A lake is dangerous, kids can drown in it, but we don't prohibit kids from going to the lake. That responsibility falls to the parents."

But Jim Steyer, a constitutional law professor at Stanford University and head of a group called Common Sense Media, said he believes Blagojevich's proposal could stand up in the courts if narrowly drawn.

Steyer said that video game companies are clearly marketing games to children that are rated for use by mature audiences only. That, Steyer said, is a tactic that Blagojevich could easily exploit to gain support.

Ottenhoff, the governor's spokeswoman, said the state would not rely on the video game industry's self-imposed ratings system because it is too lenient. She said the proposal would contain clear guidelines that would enable retailers themselves to determine if a game could be dispensed to minors.

But David Vite, president of the Illinois Retail Merchants Association, said that would put retailers in the unenviable position of having to make subjective judgments that police and prosecutors could later second guess.

"Is a fistfight between Popeye and Brutus in the old Popeye cartoons too violent? I don't know. Is knocking Humpty Dumpty off the wall too violent? I don't know," Vite said.

At a Blockbuster outlet in Villa Park, Sue Anderson strolled the aisles with two of her sons who were looking for a video game to play.

Anderson acknowledged the appeal of tougher regulations but said threatening store owners with criminal charges might be going overboard.

"I think vocalizing, explaining is enough and then it's up to the adult," she said.

She and her sons then made their selection for the evening--the SpongeBob SquarePants game. It was rated "E" for "everyone."

HALO

GAME SUMMARY

November's biggest-selling title uses crisp graphics to create a sense of place and storytelling to interweave the tales of the hunter (aliens) and the hunted (humans).

THE GOVERNOR SAYS ...

- Intense violence.
- Primarily consists of shooting and killing aliens.
- Graphic depictions of death.

GRAND THEFT AUTO: SAN ANDREAS

GAME SUMMARY

No. 2 seller in November, this expansive saga of a one-time gang member lets the player stray from the game's main plot of finding who killed C.J.'s mother.

THE GOVERNOR SAYS ...

- Adult language.
- Violence is frequent, sometimes very brutal.
- Gangsters kill cops and steal cars.
- Gangsters solicit prostitutes, then beat prostitutes to get their money back.

The governor's list

All but two of the games on the list are rated M, the video game industry designation for mature players age 17 and older. The list also includes HALO 2 and GRAND THEFT AUTO: SAN ANDREAS.

GAME SUMMARY

DOOM 3

A Marine is trapped on a demonfilled Mars. The game's first-person perspective, sense of foreboding and multiplayer capability defined a genre when "Doom" made its debut 11 years ago.

THE GOVERNOR SAYS ...

- Game setting contains hallways streaked with blood, occasional body parts and mutilated bodies.
- The screams of other humans are part of the background music.

GAME SUMMARY

GUNSLINGER GIRL

(Unrated import) A group of young girls is brainwashed to become assassins in this import from Japan.

THE GOVERNOR SAYS ...

- Player is rewarded for how many times the victim is shot; extra points for shooting the victim after he/she is dead.

GAME SUMMARY

THE GUY GAME

This game combines the nudity of "Girls Gone Wild" with the "Jay Walking" segment on NBC's "The Tonight Show with Jay Leno."

THE GOVERNOR SAYS ...

- To win, players answer questions to expose more nudity (video).
- Trivia game with raunchy exchanges.
- Contains topless rope jumping and topless sack races.

GAME SUMMARY

HALF-LIFE

Using only first-person narrative, this story of a scientist battling mutants he inadvertently helped create represents a leap forward in game history.

THE GOVERNOR SAYS ...

- Game is violent, gory and blood-filled.
- Player watches other humans being devoured.
- Player kills aliens and federal agents.

GAME SUMMARY

HITMAN: BLOOD MONEY

(Not yet rated) A hit man tries to prevent his own slaying while he figures out why his fellow assassins are being killed one by one.

THE GOVERNOR SAYS ...

- Victims can be killed in a variety of violent ways, including strangling with a wire.

GAME SUMMARY

LEISURE SUIT LARRY: MAGNA CUM LAUDE

The player tries to help a college nerd lose his virginity in this updated version of a 17-year-old cult favorite.

THE GOVERNOR SAYS ...

Simulated sex acts.

- Nudity.
- Excessive language.

- Use of alcohol and tricks to have sex with girls.

GAME SUMMARY

MANHUNT

To prevent his execution, an inmate is freed to kill thugs intent on killing him; an off-screen "director" shouts commands to the player as the director videotapes the slayings.

THE GOVERNOR SAYS ...

- Human heads explode.
- Machetes, axes, meat cleavers are all used to disembowel enemies.
- Sniper rifles, when carefully aimed, can blow holes clean through heads.

GAME SUMMARY

MORTAL KOMBAT: DECEPTION

A sequel to the game that triggered Senate hearings on video game violence in 1994, "Deception" still urges hand-to-hand combatants to rip out opponents' organs.

THE GOVERNOR SAYS ...

Gore, impalement and dismemberment.

GAME SUMMARY

POSTAL 2

Over-the-top violence is the hallmark of this game that requires players to run errands in a city with several violent outbreaks.

THE GOVERNOR SAYS ...

- Contains extremely violent reactions to stress, like decapitation while waiting in line.
- Character has sexually transmitted disease.

GAME SUMMARY

PSI OPS: MINDGATE CONSPIRACY

The main character uses telekinesis, mind control and other mental powers to defeat the protectors of a coverup.

THE GOVERNOR SAYS ...

- Exploding heads and soul eating.
- Harsh language.
- Nudity.

GAME SUMMARY

RESIDENT EVIL: OUTBREAK

Part of a franchise that spawned two movies, this game forces players to fight their way out of a city overrun by seemingly deathdefying zombies.

THE GOVERNOR SAYS ...

Explicit violence and gore.

- Weapons include pipes, handguns, Molotov cocktails and rocket launchers.
- Excessive profanity.

GAME SUMMARY

RUMBLE ROSE

Scantly clad females wrestle one another in this titillating title.

THE GOVERNOR SAYS ...

- Sexual characters including a disciplinarian schoolteacher, naughty pigtailed schoolgirl, a deviant nurse, and a latex-sporting S&M slave.
- Continuous panty and chest shots.

GAME SUMMARY

SHADOW HEARTS

A young boy and girl use magic to fend off monsters as they meet characters who, among other things, make covert sexual advances at one another.

THE GOVERNOR SAYS ...

Sexual innuendo.

- Demonology and Eastern mysticism.

Rating video games

The voluntary rating system developed by the Entertainment Software

Rating Board gives consumers information about the content of a game and the appropriate ages.

(Rating symbols)

EVERYONE

Considered suitable for age 6 and older

May include slapstick comedy, some crude language.

TEEN

Considered suitable for age 13 and older

May contain violent content, mild or strong language or suggestive themes.

MATURE

Considered suitable for age 17 and older

May include more intense violence or language and mature sexual themes.

ADULTS ONLY

Not intended to be sold or rented to people under age 18.

May include graphic depictions of sex or violence.

Sources: NPD Group, Governor's office, ESRB

Chicago Tribune

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