

From N.Y. Newsday

Mature-rated titles among the top sellers

Dec. 17, 2004

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The video games "Halo 2" and "Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas" have tallied sales in the hundreds of millions of dollars, they were honored numerous times at a recent televised video games awards show and they're two of the best-reviewed games of the year.

They're also exactly the type of games Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich is fighting to keep out of the hands of minors.

Although no figures exist that show just who are buying the mature-rated games, critics contend the video game industry intentionally markets them to kids, despite a rating recommending the titles for ages 17 or older. The industry counters by saying it does its best to publicize ratings and the ratings system so parents are aware of the games' content.

What complicates matters is the games' popularity. Citing figures from the NPD Group in Port Washington, one financial research firm said "Halo 2" and "GTA: San Andreas" have combined to sell nearly 7 million copies, despite being out for only about five and seven weeks, respectively. Sales of video games were up 11 percent last month compared to the previous November, according to another firm, Friedman, Billings, Ramsey & Co., again citing NPD figures. But take away Halo 2 and GTA: San Andreas, and sales would have declined 21 percent.

Under the governor's proposal, selling such games to children under 18 could bring misdemeanor charges, with possible fines or prison time.

Earlier this week, when the Spike TV cable network aired its "Video Game Awards 2004," top honors were given to mature-rated games in half of the two dozen categories. And three of the top six best-selling games in November were rated mature, according to the NPD Group.

But despite the industry's and retailers' insistence on maintaining self-regulation, government involvement is what's needed, said Jim Steyer, who teaches First Amendment law at Stanford University and is chief executive of Common Sense Media, a nonprofit group that seeks to educate parents on entertainment media for kids.

"It's true they make a ton of money" from mature-rated games, Steyer said. "[But] I don't want them making money off my 11-year-old. That's what this legislation is really about."