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HEADLINE: VIOLENT VIDEO GAMES SERVE A PURPOSE

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BODY:

What's the perfect stocking-stuffer in a time of war?

Why, Halo 2, of course, although there's nothing angelic about it -- unless, of course, one's idea of heaven is a future generation of killers.

If you've wondered why holiday movie ticket sales are down for the second year in a row, one big factor is that children are at home playing video games, not trekking to the plex. And Halo 2, produced by mighty Microsoft, is the biggest stay-at-home lure: It sold 2.4 million units, at \$50 a pop, on Nov. 9, its "opening day."

Is there a problem here? Some say so. Gov. Rod Blagojevich, D-Ill., wants to ban the sale of violent or prurient video games, including "Halo 2," to minors.

"This is all about protecting our children until they are old enough to protect themselves," he said last week.

Professional civil libertarians, of course, are appalled by Blagojevich's idea. But such opposition is a sign that the blue-state Democrat is on to something good, politically. Democrats have the American Civil Liberties Union vote sewed up; they need help with moderate and conservative voters.

William Galston, a former domestic-policy adviser to Bill Clinton, calls Blagojevich's crusade "a step in the right direction." The governor is responding, adds Galston, "to the legitimate concerns of parents who are worried about raising children in a popular culture that they view as hostile to the values they are trying to instill." And while some may criticize Clinton's own "values," the fact remains that the 42nd president is the only Democrat to have cracked open the red states in the past quarter-century -- and Galstonian centrism was a key player in that effort.

Yet, while Blagojevich will likely gain points politically, it's unlikely that his effort will have much effect on the video-game market. Games are already rated, in the manner of movies, by the Entertainment Software Review Board; ratings range from "EC" for Early Childhood to "A" for Adult.

Moreover, a study by the National Institute of Media and the Family, a Minneapolis-based watchdog group, found that young boys gain easy access to these games.

So, even a more restrictive regime won't have much effect; every underage child knows an adult and game sales are often anonymously online.

In addition, it must be said that Halo 2 is a work of art. Its production values, soundtrack and complex story line elevate it far above the usual schlock on the shelves. Yes, it lyricizes and aestheticizes violence, but that's been true for art all along, from Botticelli's 15th-century depiction of the martyrdom of St. Sebastian to Steven Spielberg's Saving Private Ryan. In fact, the Ryan comparison is particularly appropriate because we are, once again, in a time of war. In a deep, unconscious way, Americans seem to realize that if wars must be fought, then killer instincts must be honed.

And so, the groups that normally push hardest for restrictions on entertainment are less interested in restricting war games. Pro-family groups may scourge the broadcast networks over brief flesh displays by Janet Jackson or Nicolette Sheridan, but they are mostly silent on video violence.

Indeed, in a recent editorial, Mark Earley, the president of the Prison Fellowship Ministry, the conservative Christian group founded by Chuck Colson, urged his readers to beat their plowshares into swords. "As we prepare to celebrate our third Christmas since September 11," he wrote, "modern-day Christians will recall both the lessons of history and the truth of Scripture."

And that truth, Earley continued, is that violence "must be fought." No cheek-turning here. What's needed is "force to keep human evil in check."

So, we fight in Iraq this holiday season, even as we prepare for other conflicts against evildoers around the world. Knowing that blood, sweat and tears await us during future holiday seasons, perhaps we should give thanks for Halo 2, prepping the next generation to do the hard work of freedom.