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HEADLINE: A Push to Restrict Sales of **Video Games**;
Illinois **Governor** Seeks to Prevent Minors From Purchasing 'Adult Material'

BYLINE: Peter Slevin, Washington Post Staff Writer

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BODY:

Decrying violence in fast-selling video games, Gov. Rod Blagojevich (D) wants Illinois to make it illegal for anyone younger than 18 to buy violent or sexually explicit games. Among the targets would be the Grand Theft Auto series, Halo 2 and Mortal Kombat.

Blagojevich criticized the \$7 billion video game industry for failing to find better ways to keep "adult material out of the hands of minors" and cited evidence that many production companies in the intensely competitive business marketed violent games to boys younger than 17.

"This is all about protecting our children until they are old enough to protect themselves," said Blagojevich in a written statement. "There's a reason why we don't let kids smoke or drink alcohol or drive a car until they reach a certain age and level of maturity."

Blagojevich said the legislation would define "violent" games as those in which characters physically hurt one another. "Sexually explicit" games would be those featuring nudity that "predominantly appeals to the prurient interest of the player."

The video game industry counters that it sets its own standards and informs buyers -- overwhelmingly parents and other adults -- about the content of the games. Efforts by St. Louis County and Indianapolis to regulate various kinds of video games have been rejected as unconstitutional by federal appeals courts.

"We think as an industry we can regulate ourselves," said Gail Markels, general counsel of the Entertainment Software Association, who asserted that the industry is "voluntarily making great strides."

Blagojevich, who intends to announce his plans formally on Thursday, is the latest in a long line of politicians to challenge violence and sexual content in the audio and video world. Others include Tipper Gore, Sen. Joseph I. Lieberman (D-Conn.) and Federal Communications Commission Chairman Michael K. Powell.

The focus on video games is relatively recent. Their growing popularity and the ever-intensifying competition for market share among adolescent consumers have prompted producers to create more complex narratives and more dramatic flourishes. Many include sex and death.

"The games are getting more and more violent every year. Now the kids can, in Grand Theft Auto, visit a prostitute and then kill her if they don't want to pay her," said Joanne Cantor, professor emerita at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. "I'm convinced that violent video games do contribute to adolescents becoming more violent, having more hostile feelings and more desensitization."

"I don't believe in censorship, but I do believe it's appropriate to make it difficult to acquire certain harmful things," added Cantor, author of a children's book about coping with media violence.

About 10 years ago, the industry developed a rating system similar to the kind used for movies. E stands for everyone at least 6 years old. T stands for teen, and means 13 and older; games in that category sometimes contain violence and "suggestive" themes.

M is for mature, defined as 17 and older, and may include "more intense violence" and "mature sexual themes." Many of the most popular and most criticized games -- reports suggest the two often go hand in hand -- fall into that category.

Iowa State University professor Douglas Gentile said 92 percent of children ages 2 to 17 play video games. His group, the National Institute on Media and the Family, recently sent children ages 7 to 14 into stores in four states, including Maryland, to buy M-rated games. They were successful one in three times.

Boys were more successful than girls, walking out with a game 50 percent of the time.

Harvard professor Kim Thompson studies video game content, paying a student to play -- "If anybody asks me," she joked, "I'm not hiring." She records an hour of the game, codes it for content and compares the results with industry ratings and descriptions.

In a random sample of 81 T-rated games, Thompson said, all contained violence by the researchers' definition, suggesting that Blagojevich faces a challenge in defining what Illinois would prohibit. Researchers also found that content, especially sexual content, was not always labeled.

Turning to some of the most visible M-rated games, Thompson described "genres of games that are . . . pretty much based on learning to kill." Some in the field call them "murder simulators."

"The industry," Thompson said, "continues to push the boundaries."

Critics of violent content said the Blagojevich initiative will, if nothing else, raise awareness.

"The industry has been making strides without government involvement," Gentile said, "but because of government pressure."