Debate Flares Anew Over Violence in Video Games

State lawmakers try to regulate the sale of some titles, but the industry contends such efforts amount to censorship.

By Alex Pham, Times Staff Writer

As the video game industry gears up to release a new generation of consoles that allow even sharper graphics and more realistic action, lawmakers nationwide are considering bans on the sale or rental of violent titles to minors.

In California, for instance, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has until midnight Thursday to act on a bill that would ban the sale to minors of games that "depict serious injury to human beings in a manner that is especially heinous, atrocious or cruel."

That worries the $25-billion global game industry, which fears that its wares would be the only form of entertainment other than pornography subject to such heavy regulation.

But it's welcome news to Mary Gilbertson, who yanked "Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas" from her 16-year-old son once she realized the game was about more than fast cars.

Her son argued that it was just a game, but "it still disturbed me that he found it entertaining," the Minnesota preschool teacher said of the title, which allows players to shoot cops, run over pedestrians and have sex with prostitutes, then beat them senseless.

In the weeks since publisher Take-Two Interactive Software Inc. acknowledged that some versions of "San Andreas" also included a hidden sex scene, the game has renewed and intensified longtime concerns over excessive sex and violence in video games.

The debate over violence in one of the fastest-growing segments of the entertainment industry ebbs and flows. There's disagreement over whether virtual violence breeds real violence, but the video game industry has for years churned out increasingly graphic titles that rile its critics.

"The topic tends to resurface every few years," said American McGee, a veteran game developer. "Some of it has to do with the improvements in game graphics. People who never play video games see how visceral it is, and they freak out."

In addition to the California bill, Michigan last month passed a similar law, set to take effect Dec. 1, to ban the sale of "ultra-violent explicit video games" to minors under 17. And an Illinois law, set to take effect Jan. 1, prohibits the sale or rental of violent or sexually explicit games to minors.

The Entertainment Software Assn. has filed suit in Michigan and Illinois seeking to block the laws, contending that they amount to censorship.

"The graphics [are] too shocking, too realistic not to have an effect on children," said Assemblyman Leland Yee (D-San Francisco), a child psychologist who sponsored the bill now before Schwarzenegger. "These games are very intense.... You have children scoping targets, pulling the trigger, blowing people's heads off and burning people to a crisp."

Some social scientists say the criticisms lodged against video games parallel the scrutiny that faced other new forms of media — including comic books in the 1950s and television in the 1960s.

"With just about any new medium, there has been concern about the negative effects it might have on young people," said Karen Sternheimer, a lecturer in sociology at USC. "From movies to television to comic books to music and now..."
video games, society tends to project its fears onto newer forms of pop culture. There's a generational divide that makes people on the other side nervous."

In 1957, for instance, when a 21-year-old Elvis Presley gave his trademark, hip-swiveling performance on "The Ed Sullivan Show," cameramen were ordered to shoot him from the waist up to appease offended advertisers.

Four years earlier, a Senate subcommittee led by Sen. Estes Kefauver of Tennessee held hearings on the corruptive influence of comic books, citing a book written by Frederic Wertham called "Seduction of the Innocent," which tried to link comic book reading with murder.

"There was this belief that comic books led young people to kill," Sternheimer said. "The parallels between video games and comic books are eerie."

That argument does little to appease critics of the video game industry. They contend that video games differ from traditional media because games require active participation.

"A violent game is not going to affect a 15-year-old the same way it affects a 30-year-old," said David Walsh, a psychologist and president and founder of the National Institute on Media and the Family in Minneapolis. "Adolescents are much more impulsive. They're predisposed to anger. So you put a 15-year-old in front of a violent video game for hours and hours, and you get a kid who becomes much more aggressive."

The American Psychological Assn. agreed. In August, the Washington-based group said a review of existing studies indicated that "exposure to violence in video games increases aggressive thoughts, aggressive behavior and angry feelings among youth." As a result, it adopted a resolution recommending a reduction in violence in games.

But Dmitri Williams, assistant professor of speech communication at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, said the studies on which the association based its conclusions were few and flawed.

"There are about 30 studies in all that look at this issue," Williams said. "That's really not a lot of studies, and they don't all agree with one another."

Besides, game industry executives and retailers contend, the sale of violent games to minors is already restricted under a voluntary system established by the Entertainment Software Rating Board, an industry organization that rates nearly all video games sold by major retailers.

Under the system, games are given one of six ratings, ranging from "early childhood" to "adults only." In addition to the ratings, each game is given brief descriptions. "Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas," for example, is rated "mature" and is described as having "blood and gore, intense violence, strong language, strong sexual content, use of drugs."

"We now have nine descriptions for violence alone," said Patricia Vance, president of the rating board. "You have everything from cartoon violence and fantasy violence to intense violence and blood and gore."

Although it isn't mandatory, retailers such as Wal-Mart Stores Inc. and Best Buy Co. have voluntarily agreed to restrict the sale of mature-rated games to those 17 years and older. Many stores don't sell games rated adults only.

"Today, 90% of retailers are committed to checking the age of their customers," said Doug Lowenstein, president of the Entertainment Software Assn. "They're getting better and better at it."

In a study released last fall by the National Institute on Media and the Family, retailers prevented the sale of mature-rated video games to minors 66% of the time.

Others in the video game industry argue that there are no laws restricting the sale of R-rated DVD movies and that the same standard should be true of video games.

"Why single out games?" said Jason Della Rocca, executive director of the International Game Developer Assn. "No other form of entertainment is regulated in this way."

Part of the problem, Della Rocca said, is that games are seen as children's toys, not as an entertainment medium for a broad range of audiences, including adults.

"If your mental image of a game is that of a toy and you're presented with 'Grand Theft Auto,' it's understandable that you'd be shocked," he said. "It's as if you expected TV to be 'Sesame Street,' and you're shown 'Sex and the City.' But that..."
would be absurd.

"Likewise, no one in the movie industry expects children to watch 'The Godfather' or 'Kill Bill.' It's the same with 'GTA.' It was never created for children."

Brooks Brown of Littleton, Colo., who was a student at Columbine High School in 1999 when Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris went on a killing spree, has a different take on video games. Brown, now 25, used to play "Duke Nukem" with Klebold and Harris — that is until Harris threatened to kill Brown, a year before the shootings occurred.

"I look at video games the same way I look at advertisements," Brown said. "They're not designed to make you do anything you're not inclined to do. My guess is that 99.9% of people who play games have absolutely no inclination to kill people.

"Video games, like advertising, only push you to kill if you're already inclined to do that anyway," Brown added. "Dylan and Eric were already very, very violent people. We know that now from Eric's diary. They just weren't taught how to deal with stress and frustration."

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