Sex, boys and video games

I'VE ALWAYS been scared of 17-year-old boys. Particularly when I was 17, but even now.

I have learned to avoid their hormone-amped, hostile glances, figuring every one of them is in some kind of dangerous gang. Especially if he's wearing red or blue, or making any kind of complicated shadow puppets when there is no nearby wall or light source.

But it turns out I have nothing to worry about. Los Angeles is now so safe, the city is looking not to protect society from 17-year-old boys but to protect them from society.

On Thursday, the city sued the firm that makes the video game "Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas" over a hidden sex scene that can be unlocked by hacking into the computer coding. The city believes that parents who simply wanted to buy their boys a wholesome cop-shooting, hooker-killing, car-stealing game were unfairly duped. Because if the ratings board had known about the scene, the game probably would have been bumped up to an "Adults Only" rating (restricting it to those 18 and over) instead of "Mature" (which keeps it away from anyone under 17).

That means that all across Los Angeles, innocent 17-year-old boys with advanced computer skills were being exposed to moderately rendered, computer-animated soft-core pornography. And City Atty. Rocky Delgadillo wants to make sure someone pays for doing this to our kids. Because if these teen computer geniuses are given the opportunity to unlock a video-game sex scene, then they'll be just one step away from breaking the code that allows them to type dirty words into Google.

Although I wish a teenage boy's world were as full of innocence and wonder as Delgadillo does, I wondered if consensual animated sex was really the kind of thing that would offend a 17-year-old male who grew up in Los Angeles. So I tracked one down and asked him if this was the kind of thing that would warp his impressionable mind.

Harrison Schaaf, a junior at Oakwood High School, turned 17 last month, placing him among the most vulnerable and malleable 17-year-olds in L.A.

Schaaf has played "GTA," but he has avoided the sex scene you have to unlock because it sounded hard to do. "But I'm sure it would be hilarious," Schaaf said. "I'm absolutely certain." He has, however, gotten the game's main character to chase after women with a baseball bat. It can be frustrating, remember, to be a 17-year-old boy.

Crossing "chasing women with a baseball bat" off the list of things that offend a 17-year-old boy, I pressed him for what he did find offensive. Schaaf spent a lot of time thinking — and came up empty. None of the sex he's seen on the Internet bothered him. At first he had thought "Kill Bill" did, but then he decided to watch the movie again and thought it was "awesome."

When pressed, he admitted that really racist stuff, such as the 1915 movie "Birth of a Nation," was kind of obscene. And when I asked him if a column about not supporting the troops was offensive, he immediately said, "Yeah, that's kind of bad. That's offensive." So I'm thinking that even though Delgadillo's heart is in the right place (namely, shoring up easy votes for his run for attorney general against Jerry Brown in June's primary), he's fighting a losing battle. As the documentary "This Film Is Not Yet Rated" points out, all our rating systems are arbitrary and ultimately ineffective. Though XXX, while completely made-up, is still kind of exciting.

Now that kids can surf the Web, rent movies through online retailers, watch hundreds of cable channels and download gangster rap, it's impossible for society to restrict the flow of information to them. And even though they're a lot more jaded and harsh, it hasn't made them any more violent or sexually active.

I understand that we wish a prelapsarian childhood for our kids, because, in our daily stresses, we long for that
simplicity for ourselves. But when you're a kid, you want the opposite: You're desperately curious about the world and excited for all the information you can get. And no lawsuit is going to keep 17-year-olds away from that. Besides, the more time they're playing video games, the more time they're away from me.