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Rated "M" for Mature

Video games are becoming a bigger part of American culture. When they were first introduced, they were geared towards minors. However, an increasing amount of game developers are making mature themed games with excessive amounts of violence and sex. Many minors are getting their hands on these games when most of them cannot handle the mature themes. So who is responsible for the minors playing these games? Many parents claim that it is the retailers' fault for selling the games to the minors in the first place, or they blame the developers for making a violent video game. However, these parents are just making excuses for their inability to parent their own children. Michigan recently passed a law "making the sale, or rental, of violent games to minors illegal within the state of Michigan" (Touve). This law is a good start to help keep mature rated games out of the hands of minors.

The Entertainment Software Rating Board or ESRB was created in 1994 and rates every video game that is developed ("Entertainment Software Rating Board"). The ESRB has 6 ratings. "EC" stands for early childhood and is intended for persons 3 years and older. Games rated "EC" have nothing that a parent would find unsuitable for their child. "E" stands for everyone and is intended for persons 6 years and older. These games may have very little cartoon, fantasy, or mild violence and, or very little use of mild language. "E10+" stands for everyone 10 and older. These games may contain more cartoon, fantasy, or mild violence, mild language, and, or very little suggestive themes. "T" stands for teen and is intended for persons 13 years and older. These games may contain

violence, suggestive themes, crude humor, very little blood, and, or very little use of strong language. “M” stands for mature and is intended for persons 17 years and older. These games may contain strong violence, blood and gore, sexual content, and, or strong language. “AO” stands for adults only and is intended for persons 18 years and older. These games may contain expanded scenes of intense violence and, or vivid sexual content and nudity (“Entertainment Software Rating Board”).

Before the recently passed law, some retailers would allow minors to buy mature rated games, others would still prohibit minors from buying them if they were under 17, or were unaccompanied by a parent. This uneven enforcement of content suggestions creates a problem. Under the new law signed by Jennifer Granholm, “A retailer caught selling a violent game to a minor would be subject to a fine of up to \$5,000...” (ESA Suing Michigan Over Violent Games Law). The law also stated:

Furthermore, repeat offenders could be liable for fines up to \$15,000 on the second infraction and as high as \$40,000 after that. And, any person who pretends to be a minor's parent or legal guardian in order to get the game for that minor will face up to 93 days in jail and/or a fine of up to \$15,000. The manager of a business that lets a minor view or play a violent game also would face up to 93 days in jail and/or a steeper fine of up to \$25,000. (ESA Suing Michigan Over Violent Games Law)

Granholm is serious about keeping violent video games away from minors. This is imperative because the nature of the content is harmful. Minors may take the content the wrong way and think that it is alright to swear or harass people because a character in a video game does it. The steep fines are also a necessity. If the fines are minimal, no one

has any reason to follow the law. By making the fines very large, retailers will have no choice but to comply.

One of the big reasons why this law was enacted was because of the “Hot Coffee” modification, or mod for short, that was unlocked in the PC version of the game Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas. A hacker was able to unlock a hidden mini game by changing the game’s programming code that would allow you to have sex with the character’s girlfriend. Changing programming code is very difficult and only computer programmers are able to do it. Only after changing the programming code was this content able to be unlocked. This mod was then distributed over the internet which would allow people to download it and have it applied to their game. The Playstation 2 and Xbox versions of the game still had the same sex scene, but it only showed the outside of the house, and did not let you control the scene. The same scene could be accessed on the Playstation 2 and Xbox versions, but many secret “codes” were required and it was much harder than downloading it off of the internet. Many politicians and parents were upset by this sex scene and demanded that the game be changed to an “AO” rating. The game was previously rated “M”. Why are parents and politicians getting mad at developers? The developers have the right to make any kind of game that they wish. If anything, the parents should be mad with the retailers who sold the minors this game. This is why Granholm’s new law is a good start towards helping parents monitor what games their children play. Now, parents cannot blame retailers for selling their children video games since it is illegal. Instead, they will have to take responsibility themselves and learn how to tell their children that some games are too mature for them.

Another reason that politicians want this law enacted is because many of them believe that violent video games make people violent. Two studies were conducted and published in the April 2000 edition of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* to determine what the effects of long-term and short-term exposure to video games would do to human behavior. The first study had 227 students from an introductory psychology course at a university participating (Anderson 776). All of the students were asked to fill-out questionnaires about irritability, favorite video games, how violent these games are, and time spent on video games. According to the results, “violent video game play and aggressive personality separately and jointly accounted for major portions of both aggressive behavior and nonaggressive delinquency” (Anderson 782). In other words, this study concluded that playing video games for a long period of time can cause people to be more emotional, in aggressive and nonaggressive ways. However, this doesn’t mean that all violent video games should be taken off of the shelves. The study did not take into account the fact that the behavior results found in the study could be people who were already violent in nature, and were attracted to these violent games.

The second study had 210 students from a university that participated (Anderson 783). The authors stated, “In this experiment we examined the effects of violent video game play on aggressive thought, affect, and behavior and on world view. We also examined the interactive effects of gender and trait irritability on these variables” (Anderson 783). In this study, the participants played a video game instead of commenting about video games (Anderson 783). According to the results, “In the short term, playing a violent video game appears to affect aggression by priming aggressive thoughts (Anderson 788). In other words, while playing a violent video game, a person

thinks more violently than if that person had been playing a non violent video game. These studies prove why minors should not be playing excessively violent video games. If college students became more aggressive after playing a violent video game, then minors, who may not be able to control their emotions as much as college students, could become dangerously aggressive.

The only problem with this new law that Michigan has enacted is that it “does not take into account the ESRB rating system to determine which games are affected” (“ESA Suing Michigan Over Violent Games Law”). The law says that an illegal game is one that:

continually and repetitively depicts extreme and loathsome violence...real or simulated graphic depictions of physical injuries or physical violence against parties who realistically appear to be human beings, including actions causing death, inflicting cruelty, dismemberment, decapitation, maiming, disfigurement, or other mutilation of body parts, murder, criminal sexual conduct, or torture.

(“ESA Suing Michigan Over Violent Games Law”)

The Entertainment Software Association or ESA is suing Michigan because of the vagueness of this law. “The ESA offers a range of services to interactive entertainment software publishers including a global anti-piracy program, business and consumer research, government relations and intellectual property protection efforts” (“About the Entertainment Software Association”). The ESA also believes that this law would be “a violation of the First Amendment” (“About the Entertainment Software Association”). “If this law is implemented, it will not only limit First Amendment rights for Michigan's residents, but, by virtue of its vagueness, it will also create a huge amount of confusion

for Michigan's retailers, parents, and video game developers,” Douglas Lowenstein, president of the ESA said (“About the Entertainment Software Association”). This law is too vague. Almost any game could be classified under this law and not every game is meant solely for adults. The law needs to be changed in order to just abolish mature and adult only rated games to be sold to minors. These are the games that have the most amount of violence and, or sex in them. Most every game is going to have some kind of violence in it, but cartoon violence is something minors can handle. As for violating the First Amendment, there is no difference between not selling a game to a minor and not letting a minor into an R-rated movie. You’re not allowing a minor to do what he or she wants, which is to see an R-rated movie. This is the same thing as not allowing a minor to buy a video game that he or she wants.

Of course, this law will not prevent every minor from getting their hands on a mature rated game. This law is easily avoidable. Any minor that has an older friend or sibling can have that person buy the game for him or her as long as the minor is not present while the older person is trying to buy the video game. However, parents should make more of an attempt to know what kinds of games their kids are playing and decide whether or not their child can handle it. The government and parents have to meet halfway. Parents need to decide if a game is alright for their children, and the government needs to prohibit children from buying these games if their parents feel they are not alright for their child. It is good that Michigan has stepped in since parents don’t always know that games can be very violent or sensuous.

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