Video game violence in the cross hairs

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Columbine. The Washington snipers. Gang shootings in Oakland. Violent video games were blamed in all of them.

The latest exhibit in the People v. Video Games involves an Alabama teen who an attorney says was inspired by the "Grand Theft Auto" franchise to steal cars and shoot three people.

As the electronic entertainment industry prepares to defend itself in that case, Rep. Joe Baca, D-Rialto, is lobbying for his second piece of legislation targeting games this time a call to re-evaluate the rating system designed to keep violent games out of children's hands.

The $11-billion industry is taking its turn on the spit of public opinion, roasting on the same fire that left scorch marks on works of literature, some musical genres and movies.

"It's just the newest political football for everyone to play with," said Lawrence Walters, a Florida-based First Amendment lawyer whose firm often defends the video-game industry.

Neither side plans to drop the ball.

"Columbine is to video games what 9-11 is to terrorism," says Jack Thompson, a longtime critic of the game industry.

The Miami-based attorney is bringing a more than $600-million lawsuit against four companies for letting the mature-rated games "Grand Theft Auto III" and "Grand Theft Auto: Vice City" get into the hands of then 16-year-old Devin Moore.

Moore, now 18, is accused of fatally shooting three men and stealing a patrol car after the shootings in Fayette, Ala. His trial on murder charges starts in July.

If it wasn't for Moore's reportedly constant playing of "Grand Theft Auto" games, those two police officers and a 911 dispatcher would still be alive, Thompson said.

"It's a killing simulator," he said. "And you play a sociopath."

Rockstar, makers of the "Grand Theft Auto" series, countered Thompson's remarks in a statement:

"The abundance of blatantly false information that circulates about our games only serves to mischaracterize the content and creates a fear of the unknown for parents, rather than educating them about the rating system and the diversity of entertainment choices offered by the games industry."

The Moore case isn't the only media-related tragedy some have linked to games. Thompson and other critics have attempted to link the Columbine High School shootings and the Washington snipers to first-person shooter video games which present the game from the viewpoint of the main character, seeing the game through their eyes.

The Columbine shooters, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, reportedly were avid players of "Doom," while Thompson has said that D.C. gunman Lee Boyd Malvo trained in "sniper mode" on the Xbox game "Halo."

But recent court rulings have favored the game industry.

In 2001, the wife of slain Columbine teacher Dave Sanders sued 25 gaming companies, including Nintendo

of America and Sony Computer Entertainment, seeking $5 billion in punitive damages. The lawsuit was dismissed in March 2002.

Another dismissed lawsuit concerned the Paducah, Ky., school shooting, in which 14-year-old Michael Carneal shot at a student prayer group at Heath High School in 1997, killing three students. Nintendo, Sega and Sony were among those named in the $33-million lawsuit.

Legislators have kept an eye on the game industry for years, with Sens. Joe Lieberman, D-Conn., and Hillary Rodham Clinton, D-N.Y., among the notables attempting to call out the industry about its content.

Baca first tried his hand at regulation in May 2002 with the Protect Children from Video Game Sex and Violence Act, which would have made it a federal crime to sell violent and sexually explicit games to minors. The bill failed.

"We have to get something done," he said. "We can't wait for the industry to do anything. They're self-regulated."

Carolyn Rauch, senior vice president of the Entertainment Software Alliance, said today's legislators just don't understand the industry.

"The good news is, the next generation of lawmakers are the ones that are growing up with the games now," she said. "They'll be the first ones to really get it."

Blinded with science

The battle over video-game violence includes the world of social science, where hundreds of studies linking violent entertainment and aggressive behavior have been debated.

Perhaps the most telling conflict is illustrated by the joint statement in 2000 on the impact of entertainment violence on children, issued at the Congressional Public Health Summit and endorsed by the American Medical Association, American Academy of Pediatrics, American Psychological Association and the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry.

The statement said "well over 1,000 studies ... point overwhelmingly to a causal connection between media violence and aggressive behavior in some children."

In many circles, this ended the discussion: Violent media leads to aggressive behavior.

But in 2002, psychology professor Jonathan Freedman analyzed all the research done on the subject in his book, "Media Violence and Its Effect on Aggression," and concluded that no such link exists. Freedman went on to say it's not more than 1,000 studies it's more like 200.

Marjorie Heins of NYU's Free Expression Policy Project believes the social sciences aren't equipped to find any clear answers.

"You can't prove through experiments that there's a cause-and-effect relationship (between violent media and behavior)," she said. "Human aggression is far too complex to find the results in a lab."

David Arganda of Riverside, waiting for his son to come out of EB Games at Victoria Gardens in Rancho Cucamonga one day recently, said he believes the violent media-aggression debate is a little overblown.

"I grew up with BB guns and playing cowboys and Indians," he said. "I turned out OK. I never beat anybody up, and I'm 45 years old."

The system in place

According to the Entertainment Software Alliance, the average age of a gamer is 30. But for those who still need parental guidance on their purchases, there's the current video game rating system.

The Entertainment Software Ratings Board assigns letter categories to games, telling prospective buyers about the content. A game like "Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas" would be rated M for Mature, which means the game isn't appropriate for anyone under the age of 17.

On the back of the games, consumers can see the letter category again, as well as a short description of what's actually inside. A typical M-rated content descriptor would read "blood, sexual content, violence."

The rating system serves as the go-to answer for most defenders of the industry, though its effectiveness is debated.

"The games are clearly labeled. It's up to the parents what they bring into their home," said Carolyn Rauch of the Entertainment Software Alliance.

But Stacey Fuller of Fontana, a teacher in the Lake Elsinore Unified School District, said she thinks the industry could help more.

"They should follow what video stores do and have a separate section for adults," she said as she waited for her family outside EB Games at Victoria Gardens. "I don't think the ratings are enough."

One of the arguments against the current rating system is that it's not accurate enough.

A study of 81 games rated T for Teen, conducted by the Harvard School of Public Health, found that 79 of those games, or 98 percent, involved intentional violence and that 42 percent contained virtual blood.

Kimberly Thompson, who headed the study, voiced her support for a universal rating system that covers every form of media.

"Parents need the best information on content, and I think the system would help," she said.

But Patricia Vance, president of the Entertainment Software Ratings Board, said the system is working "beautifully."

"Nine out of 10 video game purchases are made by parents," she said. "And they believe in the ratings. Parents want to make their own decisions, and we're giving them a tool to do that."

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