

Clinton joins video game censoring rally

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Video games are big business for the computer industry, from software monolith Microsoft to start-up companies run by individual game programmers, yet as the content of many games becomes increasingly violent and pornographic, legislators and consumer advocacy groups are stepping up efforts to regulate what game manufacturers are offering.

The latest effort to crack down on violent and sexually explicit games came this week from Sen. Hillary Clinton, D-N.Y., when she announced plans to introduce legislation to protect children from inappropriate video games, and singled out the popular game, "Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas," in particular.

"The disturbing material in 'Grand Theft Auto' and other games ...is stealing the innocence of our children and it's making the difficult job of being a parent even harder," Clinton said in a news release, adding that "I believe that the ability of our children to access pornographic and outrageously violent material on video games rated for adults is spiraling out of control."

Specifically, she called for enforcement of the existing video-game ratings system by punishing retailers who sell the games to minors. She would impose a \$5,000 penalty on those caught providing minors with sexually explicit and violent games. Jeanne B. Funk, a psychology professor at the University of Toledo, Ohio, was only cautiously optimistic about Clinton's proposed legislation. She told United Press International that numerous efforts have been made in the past to push through similar proposals at the state and municipal levels, but even if

they were passed by the legislatures, they ultimately were overturned in the courts because such regulations were seen as a violation of the constitutional protection of freedom of speech. Funk said given Clinton's high public profile and her strong ties with some Republicans who were pressing for family values, her legislation might have a better chance at becoming law than others. She said there is a direct correlation between playing violent video games and becoming aggressive in real life.

Playing violent games leads to "a desensitization to violence ...and lower empathy," Funk said. A 2002 study by the Indiana University School of Medicine found playing violent games triggers unusual brain activity among aggressive adolescents with disruptive behavior disorders. Clinton highlighted those findings in the news release. Video games currently are given ratings of Mature (M) or Adults Only (AO), if their content is deemed unsuitable for children -- with M regarded as suitable only for those 17 years old and over -- but retailers have no legal obligation to abide by them. Under Clinton's proposal, game sellers would be responsible for who gets hold of the games, just as liquor sellers are held responsible if they are found selling alcohol to those under age 21. Funk said the proposal was a good one, but she cautioned that legislators should "think carefully" before they moved ahead.

"There are a lot of young clerks who haven't had much training (in judging age)," she said. If they sell to minors, "is it fair to punish them?"

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