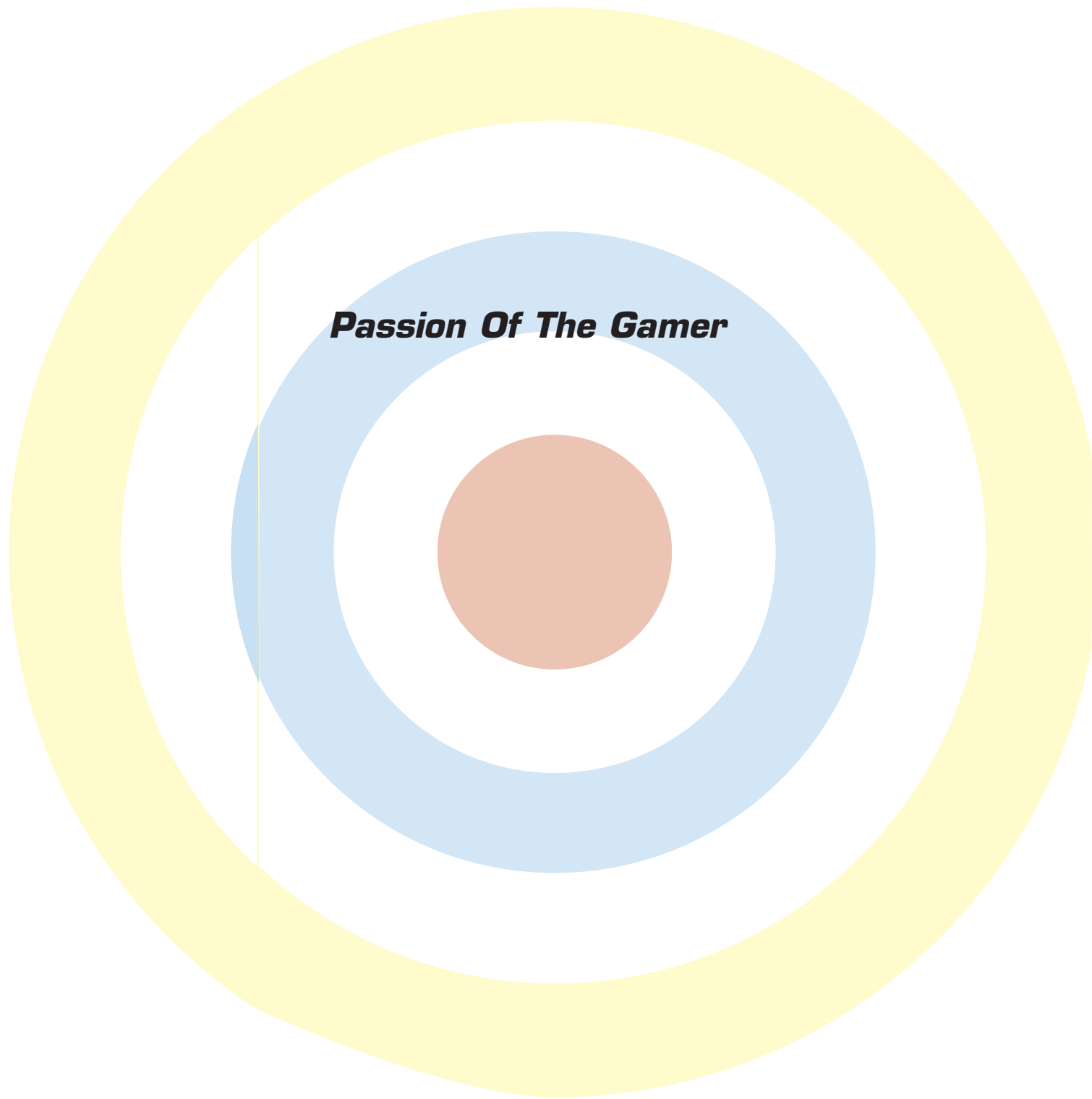


***Passion
Of The
Gamer***



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Contents

Introduction

Page 1

Passion of the Gamer

Page 3

Fonts Used

Page 17

Links

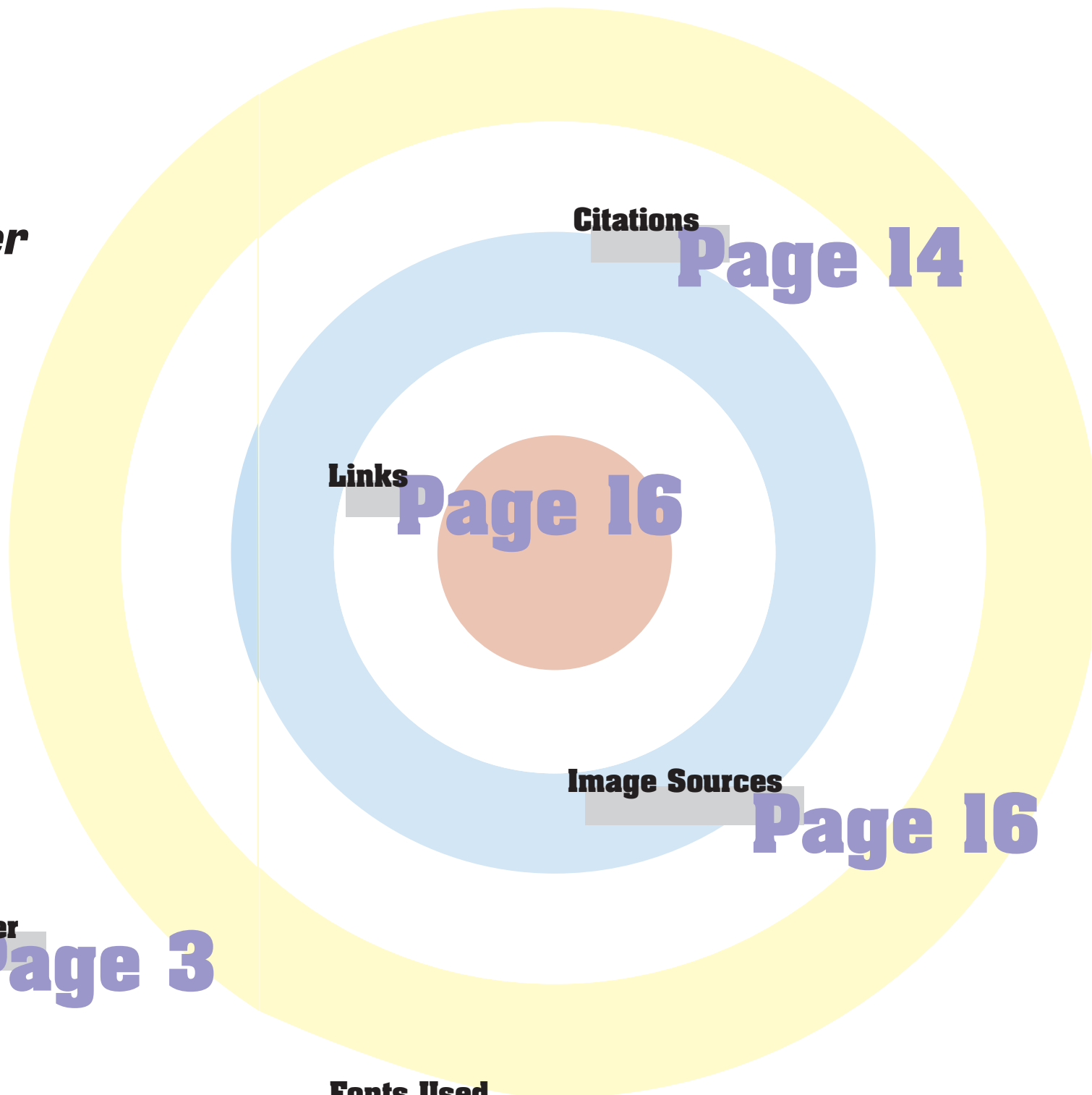
Page 16

Image Sources

Page 16

Citations

Page 14





The squeal reverberates around me as another one dies. I reload, and move quickly across the open field, dotted only by sparse brush and trees, lined by a cliff on my right and a sheer rock wall on my left. Moving uphill along the rolling country, I feel the claustrophobia of the box canyon as the walls narrow along side of me, moving in closer as I move in deeper. It doesn't help that there's a sheer drop off just a few yards to my right.

The last of them; he's bigger than the others, smarter, faster, pops out from behind a boulder and unleashes a stream of blue energy blobs at me. I curse, scooting sideways for the trees as the shields on my armor dwindle, dropping to dangerous levels. This one has stopped firing, regrouping behind its boulder again. I check my ammo...then switch weapons. Not because I was low on rounds for the rifle, but because the pistol was



the better weapon for what I was about to try. Even with its nifty little scope, I still prefer it for close in fighting...when I don't have a shotgun.

I dance out again, and charge...just as the big blue bastard lets loose some more plasma. I soak it up and keep coming, giving as good as I get as I run the pistol to slide lock and start to reload. He's predictable, but dangerous. He roars, growling at me and swings the glowing weapon at my head. It brushes by, but my shields are still low...and disappear completely as the weapon slides across them. I spin, turning as his failed swipe at my cranium puts him behind me. I step up, and smash the butt of the pistol against the back of his head.

He drops, dead...out like a light.

My shields scream at me, then start to recharge. I finish reloading, and police the weaponry. I'm not interested in their plasma guns...but their grenades will prove to be quite useful...and soon.



If you recognize this last scene, congratulations. You've played that game so much you've had dreams about battling the Covenant across the plains of Halo. If you haven't...you're missing out. It's been considered one of the best game series ever produced; given awards and accolades by many different sources. If you are into first-person shooters, it comes highly recommended.

Gamers are a fast growing group of people, and nowadays, quite diverse. There was a time that gamers weren't even known as gamers...no, these people were known as 'geeks', 'dweebs', 'dorks'...and worse. These were the loners, the outcasts, more interested in their books and games than the latest sports scores. They knew more about technology and literature than they did about music and movies. Sadly, for a long time, many of them were ostracized for it.

In today's society, the gamer is typically associated with console and PC gaming, although gamers range from these to the old-fashioned pen-and-paper RPG player to the collectible card gamer. All forms of gaming have come under fire, under scrutiny at one time or another.



In the '70's and '80's, it was the tabletop RPG games such as Advanced Dungeons and Dragons that were targeted by many groups as 'evil' or even 'demonic.' Ask any 'old-school' gamer about Jack Chick, and you'll get a response of some kind. This market has changed, grown and evolved to include the digital media we've come to know today. These same truths hold for games, especially in today's market. The average age of today's gamer is 30 years old. Quite indicative of the

“Players were not statistically different from the non-playing control group.”

growing market, where women and adults are more and more becoming the target demographic.

The gaming industry is a multi-billion dollar business that is growing and changing every day. With new games coming out every month, there are a lot of dollars flying out to these companies. However, there are a lot of concerns about the content of modern games. Most of this concern stems from parents and parents' groups who are concerned about the violent and sexual content of these games and how their children are affected. There are also concerns of other effects on children, such as developmental, physical and mental affects of video games and their content.

A number of studies have been done by many different groups to find out the effects of gaming on children. A study on the short-term effects of violent games on young adults showed that young adults and children playing these games were more prone to violence and outbursts [*Betanews.com*].

Some of the other negative effects of video games on children include:

- ✗ Reinforcement of racial and/or sexual stereotypes
- ✗ Poor academic performance
- ✗ Desensitization to violence
- ✗ Antisocial behavior
- ✗ Addiction

However, another study, a study into the links between games and aggression, showed that there was not a strong link between the violent game and the aggression factor in the long term:

“Players were not statistically different from the non-playing control group in their beliefs on aggression after playing the game than they were before playing, Williams said. Nor was game play a predictor of aggressive behaviors. Compared with the control group, the players neither increased their argumentative behaviors after game play nor were significantly more likely to argue with their friends and partners. [*Physorg.com*]”



The data from this study indicates there is little influence on children from games. Other studies seem to counteract this data. Later in this study reported on Physorg.com, we find

out that any reactions they found were only in the short term. Taking this data into account, as of right now, we only have to worry about the children and their violent proclivities immediately after they play the game, not a few weeks later.

Why are there so many concerns about video games then? Because of recent events that some people believe are linked to the playing of video games; such as the shooting at Columbine High School. It was a tragedy, and it should not have happened to anyone, but were video games really at fault, or was it two troubled teens who were lashing out at a world they believed to be full of nothing but hate and scorn for them? According to the investigation by the FBI, the real cause of the shooting, as revealed by Slate.com, had more to do with who they were rather than what they did or even where they did it. One of them was described as a clinical 'psychopath', and the other was just depressed



Photo: Eric Harris (left) & Dylan Klebold caught on surveillance cameras in the Columbine High School cafeteria.

and angry; a "depressive."

Why did video games even get brought up? Because, the two of them played Doom, a first person shooter that puts the player in the boots of a marine fighting the legions of Hell escaping to Mars, then eventually to Earth. In this instance, maybe we can see the tenuous link between the killers and their activities, but then again, looking at the FBI report, we see that the methodical planning and cold calculating mind of a psychopath as it viewed the world.



"Harris married his deceitfulness with a total lack of remorse or empathy—another distinctive quality of the psychopath. Fuselier was finally convinced of his diagnosis when he read Harris' response to being punished after being caught breaking into a van. Klebold and Harris had avoided prosecution for the robbery by participating in a "diversion program" that involved counseling and community service. Both killers feigned regret to obtain an early release, but Harris had relished the opportunity to perform. He wrote an ingratiating letter to his victim offering empathy, rather than just apologies. Fuselier



“He was a brilliant killer without a conscience, searching for the most diabolical scheme imaginable.”

remembers that it was packed with statements like ‘Jeez, I understand now how you feel’ and ‘I understand what this did to you.’[Slate.com]”

“Their view of Harris is more reassuring, in a certain way. Harris was not a wayward boy who could have been rescued. Harris, they believe, was irretrievable. He was a brilliant killer without a conscience, searching for the most diabolical scheme imaginable. If he had lived to adulthood and developed his murderous skills for many more years, there is no

telling what he could have done. His death at Columbine may have stopped him from doing something even worse. [Slate.com]”

If anything, the data presented in the report showed that by playing Doom, Klebold and Harris were slowed in their progress and it prevented them from succeeding in their goals to commit one of the

worst killing sprees in history. The fact that it happened at a school, their school was happenstance. If it had happened five years later, it would have happened at their workplace or some other location they might

have known that might have had a large group of victims.

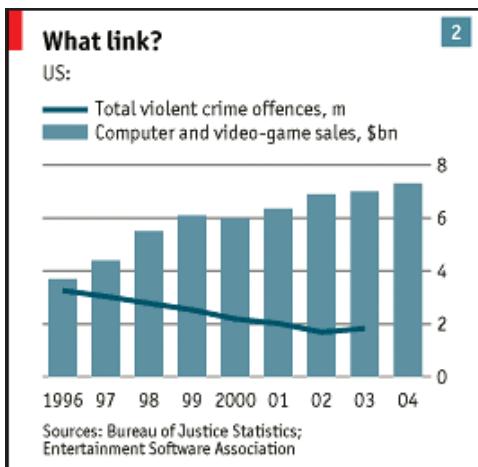
In this instance, at least, we see that, while the perpetrators may have played video games and been exposed to violence in such a way, it had little if anything to do with their eventual actions. This leaves one to wonder about these other shootings and incidents at schools. Is there something bigger at work there? Something beyond the games and the movies these kids are exposed to? The questions remain about

“The ESRB independently assigns computer and video game content ratings.”

the actual effects of video games on children. An informal survey offered online to both parents and non-parents by the author of this document revealed that the general consensus of those taking the survey believed such acts were the fault of bad parenting rather than any other sort of direct affect of video games or other media. The survey offered that many people believed the problem stems not from the games but more from the parenting, or lack thereof.

So then, we look to parents for solutions. What can parents and those with children in their care do to make sure that the young people they are responsible for do not get material unsuited for them? One answer the gaming world has offered to parents and children alike is the ESRB:

“The Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) is a non-profit, self-regulatory body established in 1994 by the Entertainment Software Association (ESA). The ESRB independently assigns computer and video game content ratings, enforces industry-adopted advertising guidelines and helps ensure responsible online privacy practices for the interactive entertainment software industry. [ESRB.org]”



The ESRB was created by game developers in



U.S. Senator Joseph Lieberman (I-CT, pictured above): "The rating system established by the ESRB is the most comprehensive and informational within the entertainment industry," said Lieberman. "Parents should understand and use the ratings to help them decide which video games to buy for their families." Lieberman also recognized "ESRB's ongoing commitment to helping parents make smart choices for their kids."

response to growing concerns about the content of games. In order to combat the problem of children getting games that are not suited for them, parents need to be educated on the ratings system and what the symbols on the

game mean. A synopsis of the ratings can be found at the ESRB.org website, but retailers should also train their employees to be able to at least give a minimal idea of the content of the games they are selling, even if they have not played them. Many game retailers, simply by the nature of their employment, know, can, and are happy to explain the game ratings, if asked. A lot of them, myself included, have asked whether a game was appropriate for the person the game was being purchased for. The rating system may have its flaws, but it is actually quite a bit more intuitive than the movie ratings system.

Part of the problem stems from the stigma attached to most games, especially video games, that they are all 'just kids stuff'. The attitude of many people in this country seems to be that anything animated or com-

puter generated must be okay for their kids, because 'it's just a cartoon' or 'it's just a game'. This is far from the truth. Nowadays, adult themed content can be delivered in any format, in any media, anytime. Japan is a prime example of this. Many of the most popular shows on Japanese television are in fact, prime time and animated. There are a number of adult-themed movies and shows that are completely animated.

The cartoons kids are watching may not be appropriate; even less appropriate than the 'live action' show on the next channel over. For example, the Comedy Central show *South Park* is about four young boys in a small town in Colorado. They are only eight years old and the show is a cartoon. However, the show deals with very mature subjects and has a lot of violence, language and mature content that is in no way proper for young children to watch. It's a funny show, but it is most definitely geared towards adults. Parents need to know what the content of these games are without having to play them all the way through, hence the voluntary institution of the ESRB ratings.

For all the negative effects espoused by research groups, there have been some notable positive effects to be found from gaming as well. A 2003 University of Rochester study found that young adults who played a lot of fast-paced video games showed better visual skills than those who



Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas, Rockstar Games - Rockstar came under fire for its content after user modifications opened parts of the game that were not available normally, also known as the 'hot coffee mod'.

did not [U. of Rochester news.edu]. Another study found that children who played these games also had developed better problem-solving skills and improved hand/eye coordination [BBC.co.uk]. Another study found that surgeons who played video games in their youth were faster, more precise and less likely to make mistakes

while performing surgery. [TheRegister.com] Another possible solution is stricter controls on the retailers. Imposing stiff penalties not only to the store that sold an inappropriate game to a minor, but the salesperson as well could go a long way in stemming the flow of violent games to younger children.

Demanding to know the age of the player of the games and educating the buyer, be it a parent or otherwise, of the possible content of said game can go a long way to stem the flow of inappropriate content to younger people.

The problem is both complex and simple. Parents need to be active in the development of their children. Developers should listen to their customers, and retailers should do the same. But initiating legislation regarding these games is a mistake. Be it a computer, console or role-playing game, the choice should always be offered, not forced.

Making the decision about games for children requires a balance of thought and knowledge, that only a parent or guardian of a child could have in dealing with these issues. Finding the balance between fantasy and reality, real and fake, violence and fun is the most difficult part of the matter.

In the end, I am a gamer. I've played just about every genre on about every major system in the last twenty years. I like to think I'm a fairly well adjusted 29 years old. Never lashed out, never opened fire on a bunch of people for no reason, never gotten into any serious legal trouble. One of my favorite games of all time is Halo, the game I described in my opening statement. It's a violent game about fighting back the armies of aliens known as the Covenant, who are intent on our destruction. It's bloody, gory and brutal, but one hell of a fun ride.

I, and many others like me, don't believe in all the hype around games and how bad they are. We've played games most of our lives, on computers, on consoles, even board games and tabletop role-playing games. As in all things, parents and guardians should take an active role in monitoring what their children see and are a part of. It shouldn't be left up to the government. As a gamer, I want to have the choice of what game I want to play.

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Links -

The Entertainment Software Rating Board [ESRB] - <http://www.esrb.org/>
The Center on Media and Child Health - <http://cmch.typepad.com/cmch/>
Pause Parent Play - <http://www.pauseparentplay.org/play/>
MediaWise.org - <http://www.mediafamily.org/index.shtm>
CommonSenseMedia.org - <http://www.common sense media.org/>
Center for Successful Parenting - <http://www.sosparents.org/>
Entertainment Software Association - <http://www.theesa.com/>
Entertainment Consumers Association - <http://www.theeca.com/>
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