

Using Drugs is Not a Game

East County Community Change Project • August, 2008

Glorifying the use of alcohol and drugs has become a growing trend in video games. Some even allow the player to use drugs, at least in the virtual sense, by applying state-of-the-art visual effects to simulate the effect of drug intoxication. Such games are often rated Mature 17+ meaning they should only be available to youth over the age of 16. But research shows that younger kids are frequently able to rent or purchase them without showing any proof of age.

A Game Called NARC

One of the worst offenders is a game called NARC, which allows players to use a variety of drugs including marijuana, Ecstasy, Crack, LSD and methamphetamine.

When first looking at the image on the cover a parent or caregiver might think that the game is a typical “cops and robbers” story. There *are* cops in this story, but it’s not long before they go “bad,” beginning to take the drugs that they have seized from drug dealers. Depending on which drug is used, the pace of the game changes, speeding up for meth and slowing down for marijuana. The use of drugs is key to the character’s skills and abilities, helping him advance through the game.

Since the details of the game are not listed on the product’s packaging, parents or caregivers often have no idea about its true nature. Believing the game to be harmless, they may purchase it and allow their kids to play, never

knowing what’s really going on. But if they examine the instruction sheet on the inside of the game, they would most likely be shocked to find that it is simply a listing of drugs that can be used during the game, and how each one will affect the character.

Available on PlayStation, Nintendo and Xbox, this game is currently on the shelves at family-friendly stores such as Wal-Mart and Target, as well as gaming stores like Game Crazy and GameStop.



Evidence of Harm

According to the National Institute on Media and the Family, video games can have a profound effect on children, often causing them to confuse fantasy and reality.¹ Other negative effects established by research include social isolation, poor academic performance and an increased tendency toward aggressive behavior.² Such findings have prompted members of the United States Congress to investigate the video gaming industry, seeking

regulations that would protect children from problematic content.³

The impact of drug-related content of video games has not been well-studied but recent research about substance use in other media provides considerable cause for concern.⁴ For example, a 2005 literature review of 40 studies confirmed that adolescents who were exposed to smoking in popular movies were more likely to take up smoking than those who weren't.⁵ There are also studies linking alcohol advertising with higher rates of underage drinking.⁶

Video Gaming Rating System

The gaming industry's rating system is supposed to protect kids from exposure to harmful content. However, restrictions against kids purchasing or renting games designed for Mature 17+ are rarely enforced. In 2007, youth across San Diego county conducted assessments of ten major retail chains that sell video games. 46% of underage youth were able to purchase M rated video games. 8 of the 10 retailers sold M rated video games to underage decoys. Sadly, parents are also unable to protect their children from harmful video game content. Research suggests that most of them don't seem to be aware of what kinds of games their kids are playing.⁸

Policies to Protect Kids

Given the potential harmfulness of some video games, a more effective set of policies and procedures should be implemented. Some of those that have been suggested by parents and community groups are as follows:

- Require better signage in retail stores to explain the video game rating system.
- Display games rated for older youth (M-17+) separately from games rated for everyone (E) and those rated for teens (T).

- Provide stricter enforcement of policies against sales of games rated M-17+ to underage youth.
- Place warning labels on games warning parents of illicit drug content.
- Require listing of specific drugs that are found in such games.
- Change the rating for NARC and other games with similar content to Adult-Only (AO).
- Enact stronger legislation prohibiting the sale of mature or adult-rated games to underage youth.

This fact sheet is for educational purposes, and it was produced by the Institute for Public Strategies, a nonprofit organization advancing public health through changes in policy and community norms. For more information, call (619) 456-9607, e-mail info@publicstrategies.org or visit www.publicstrategies.org

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