Game parlour violence turns real
Alex Veiga in Los Angeles
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SIX days a week, teens crowd the Blue Screen Gaming cybercafe to hunt each other down with assault rifles inside virtual computer worlds. In these video game halls, nobody gets hurt. But real-life violence has flared around some of these businesses, prompting municipal crackdowns.

Los Angeles is the latest, and largest, California city to impose restrictions. Beginning Saturday, an ordinance mandates that the city's 30 internet gaming parlours enforce the city's long-standing curfew for minors and pay for in-store surveillance cameras. There are other restrictions, among them limits on how many computers each business can operate and the prohibition of dark window coverings.

Cybercafe owners are chafing.

"There may have been problems with certain individual locations, but those could have been handled another way other than with blanket legislation," said Ernest Miller, a spokesman for San Francisco-based iGames, which represents about 500 PC gaming parlours in the United States and abroad.

Blue Screen owner Lisa Woo-Rogers says she has never had any violence problems at her establishment.

"This is going to cost an outpour of money that we weren't necessarily going to spend," she complained.

California municipalities are alone in passing specific laws covering internet gaming parlours, though some cities have sought to apply existing arcade zoning laws to the gaming cafes, Miller said.

Several shootings near cybercafes in 2002, two of them fatal, prompted the LA ordinance, which passed last month. In one of the fatal shootings, witnesses told police that the victim, a member of an Asian gang, was at an LA cybercafe hours before his body was found. In the other homicide, the victim was shot at an internet cafe in the San Fernando Valley. The next month and not far away, one youth was shot in the leg and another severely beaten at separate cybercafes.

In addition, a Los Angeles police analysis found that 86 per cent of the 134 people arrested at cybercafes were minors, most for curfew and truancy violations. Officials became convinced that the cafes tend to be gang havens.

"We wanted to put in measures before we have future problems," said Councillor Dennis Zine, who proposed the ordinance.

Miller takes issue with the theory that cybercafes are more of a magnet for gangs than any other place at which youths might congregate.

"A haven for gang activity can be any location where people gather - corner liquor stores, pool halls or cinemas," Miller said. A business's location can be a major factor, he said.
Miller, who operates an internet gaming parlour in Whittier, also blames sensationalist media coverage, which he maintains wrongly links violent video games with real-world violence.

Since Los Angeles began mulling its own ordinance more than a year ago, there have been no reports of serious crimes associated with cybercafes, said Los Angeles Police Lt. Debra A. Kirk.

"They realised they had to clean up their own act," Kirk said. "They've been self-regulating in anticipation of this ordinance."

Woo-Rogers maintains that her cafe has long adhered to the city's curfew, which prohibits those under 18 from roaming the streets during school hours or after 10 pm without a guardian.

She estimates that it will now cost her $US2,500 to install video surveillance and buy a police permit. Other operators, especially those who have crowded computers into small spaces, could be forced to turn customers away or spend on costly refurbishment (the ordinance has per-computer space requirements).

Still, the Los Angeles regulations are "very reasonable," Miller said, compared to some earlier ordinances such as one enacted in Garden Grove. That city passed an ordinance requiring businesses to log customers, have an adult and security guard present, limit hours and videotape their premises.

Initially, Garden Grove also required businesses to apply for special operating permits that typically cost thousands of dollars. But a state appellate court struck down the special permits requirement.

Other cities that neighbour Los Angeles, including Diamond Bar and the Orange County communities of Santa Ana and Orange Grove, have also regulated the cafes.

For teen devotees of the cybercafes such as Gama, the regulations may just end up curtailing their fun.

The Culver City teen was disappointed to hear he might be asked to stop playing after 10 pm if he's not accompanied by an adult.

"Sometimes we stay in other places until 2 am," Gama said. "If I can't stay until the time I want, well, what can I do about it?"

*The Associated Press*

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