You will never play the Playstation 2 game *Rule of Rose*. Australia has now successfully built a reputation of intolerance towards violence, sexuality and adult themes in computer games to the extent that the game’s producers, 505 Games, decided to entirely forego submitting the game to the Office of Film and Literature Classification (OFLC). The controversy surrounding *Rule of Rose* is as sad and telling as any other, beginning with a political free kick in Poland that got picked up by the European Union’s Commissioner for Justice, Freedom and Security, Franco Frattini, and turned into the type of trite excursion into fantasyland that makes the inner world of the computer gamer seem well socialized in comparison. Frattini, having never played or seen the game, was happy enough to decry it for teaching children how to kidnap each other and involving said children in scenes of sadomasochistic violence and depictions of live burial. He went on to petition all the justice ministries in the EU to ban the game and begin a fresh round of game-standards tightening, which, if correctly orchestrated, could climax in an orgy of congratulatory backslapping by Christmas.

Frattini’s claims of live burial, sadomasochism and sexual violence between young women makes it sound like a very tame Catholic high school simulator, except for
the all-too-predictable fact that the game contains none of these elements. ‘I have no idea where the suggestion of in-game sadomasochism has come from, nor children being buried underground. These are things that have been completely made up.’ This from none other than secretary general of the Video Standards Council in the UK, Laurie Hall. The controversy centres on a handful of non-interactive vignettes where younger girls humiliate and torture the main character, Jennifer, and then only once with any kind of potential sexual malice. A recent ‘debate’ on Channel Seven’s Sunrise rolled out the same staid arguments that permeated debates fifteen years ago. In a public statement concerning the game, Australian Family Council spokesman Bill Muehlenberg said the game ‘depicts young women as fair game for kids to torture. It could push some children over the edge, while desensitising others to violence’.

Devoted torture-edge-dwelling children have found Rule of Rose through one of Melbourne’s many illegal game traders; these entrepreneurs exist in a closing window of copyright law before American law goes into effect on Australian soil and we adopt the Digital Millennium Copyright Act’s unworkable, ill-conceived and local-industry-breaking provisions. These traders operate in a market that is one of the largest installed bases of modified consoles (meaning an Xbox or Playstation 2 hard-wired to accept burnt DVDs of games or imported titles) in the world, and thus anything refused classification by the OFLC is not only fair game, but automatically finds its way – without a cent of restitution to the developers – into the hands of thousands of curious players. Their most popular titles are a mixture of new releases and the OFLC’s blacklist. Nowhere else do games such as NARC, Marc Ecko’s Getting Up: Contents Under Pressure and Rule of Rose gain an audience – for one important reason: they are shockingly poor games. Not
merely mediocre, but abjectly devoid of fun.

IN THE VAIN HOPE OF AN R RATING The OFLC recently banned the game Reservoir Dogs, on the basis that it was a terrible idea in the first place, and in January it had clearly come back to work with sleeves firmly rolled up when it bannnered, more intriguingly, the unambiguously named NFL Blitz.

In the OFLC report on NFL Blitz:

In the course of the game, the player may access what are purported to be both legal and illegal performance-enhancing drugs for the members of the team. Choosing to use these drugs (by selecting from a menu) will have both negative and positive effects on team members, for example, by improving their speed while making them more susceptible to injury. Each drug has different characteristics. Fake urine samples may also be acquired for avoiding positive drug tests. While the game-player can choose not to use the drugs, in the Board's majority view there is an incentive to use them.

In other words, the OFLC's Classification Review Board feels that the textual representation of performance-enhancing drugs (and they are only textual in the game – buttons on a menu no more realistic than your Start button in Windows) could potentially lead a child to feel more inclined to use those drugs in the real world. On their highly paid team of steroid-freak American football players. Should they have access to one.

Under the Australian Computer Games section of the National Classification Code (NCC), titles will be refused classification where they:

- depict, express or otherwise deal with matters of sex, drug misuse or addiction, crime, cruelty, violence or revolting or abhorrent phenomena in such a way that they offend against the standards of morality, decency and propriety generally accepted by reasonable adults.

However, the standards of morality and decency have taken on an entirely sinister quality, far beyond the pale fire reserved for depictions of sexual violence. NFL Blitz is another litmus test for our media policy, which underwrites all the potentials of interactive software as merely deceptive. In other words, according to our media policy, if you can perform an action, the board should deal with it as if all players have seen that action occur. This is borne out by the vague language of the NCC: 'depict, express or otherwise deal with'. Players, however, do not merely see. They choose. They act. They are rewarded and punished for their choices.

Without so much as a whisper from game developers, the enthusiast press or even the nascent little tabloid of game criticism, games have increasingly taken on the mantle of social responsibility, consequence and even morality. To watch people in a virtual world react to your decisions has become entirely du jour; the moral fabric of a society is literalized in a few lines of code. In many popular games, killing an innocent person will be met with a scandalized and terrified populace, the law breathing down your neck, or worse. In last year's Oblivion, players found their 'fame' and 'infamy' rise and fall with each act of public theft, murder or typical gameworld malfeasance (throwing other people's shoes onto a nearby roof).

So it is especially curious to examine the last line of the NFL Blitz ruling: 'While the game player can choose not to use the drugs, in the Board's majority view, there is an incentive to use them.' There is, of course, a sort of incentive to use them. There are also dire consequences including player addiction, illness or arrest. The drugs element is depicted as a game of chance in which you trade off short-term gain for disaster down the track. Which by the standards of 'reasonable adults', including our police authorities, could not possibly be offensive, as it is precisely the message of the anti-drugs campaign on which we are spending so many millions. The issue, as always, is moral consistency.

AMERICAN HISTORY X BUTTON

More curiously, how does a recent game like Gears of War not attract the ire of the moral lobby? In this obscenely popular homage to the semiotics of gay pornography – laced as it is with bald growing musclemen shouting 'There's the grub! Put him back in his hole!' without the slightest hint of irony – you can perform what is game history's most offensive act of violence. Once you shoot an alien invader enough to injure but not kill it, you can then sidle up to the heaving, blubbering monster and press a button to 'curb-stomp', in other words, explode its skull between your descending foot and the ground. That alone is gratuitous and unnecessary, but not offensive in the true sense.

Where Gears of War earns this dubious honour is when the game's producer, 'Cliffy B', proudly stated that the feature is culled from a film, American History X (Tony Kaye, 1998), in fact. That scene, in which most audiences winced and screamed and which most certainly elevated the film to an R 18+ on its own, is where Edward Norton orders a young African-American man who has just invaded his house to bite the curb. The next moment, a skull shatters and the film takes on an entirely new dimension. The imagination of the gamer operates often on this schema; isolate fragments of 'cool' and apply elsewhere, freely, at random. Cliffy B's detachment of the physical mechanics of a hate crime from its context is just one incredible example of how the aesthetics of games operate, poaching without mercy from whatever nearby cultural touchstones it wishes to emulate.

It also illustrates that under our current schema an act of violence which helped elevate a film to R 18+ somehow only warrants MA 15+ in a game, despite the fact you can perform it yourself, repeated, and with more gore. The need for an R 18+ rating for computer games is now utterly beyond doubt, beyond discussion and beyond the proverbial joke. Supporters of the current system, such as they exist in a couple of questionably funded pockets of the legal apparatus in Queensland and South Australia, are now pinning their political careers on a broken mechanism that has long since proved its uselessness. The holdouts have to be considered not merely conservative, unless conservative media policy benefits crime, harms at-risk children, is morally ambiguous and anti-capitalist – Occam's razor will tell us it is more likely that the mechanism for change has simply broken down.

An alternative framework for the NCC could remedy some of the more egregious displays of hypocrisy. Beginning with a comprehensive contextual armature for rating the content of a game that is similarly coded (PG, M, MA, R) but idiosyncratic to the nature of games – away from 'impact' and more aware of the fabric of consequence, reward and punishment employed by the game. If neither major political party can come to
understand the benefit of correcting this bizarre policy logjam, then there is no hope for broader media issues such as digital television's quagmire, community television protection or cross-media ownership standards. We will have entered the second half of the first decade of the twenty-first century, in which media has undergone some of the most drastic changes, merely sleepwalking.

SECOND LIFE: MATERIAL WORLD

Variously described as a game, virtual chat room, and 'The Sims without a point', Second Life stands as an object lesson in marketing over production. Describing the technological mise en abyme of Second Life is notoriously difficult, but it sits somewhere between the experiences of an online game such as World of Warcraft, in that you have a character that you can move around and interact with others, and a public chatroom, where most of the activity consists of people waiting for something to happen.

If television is facing a crisis of reality's representation, and cinema is slowly being fractured and recomposed because of the technologies of distribution, it is fitting that games (sorry, digital entertainment) find themselves assaulted by the problem once imagined to be its first victim—namely, boredom. What is most absurd and striking about Second Life is its power, real or imagined, to generate news. That people spend real money on items in the game, or that Duran Duran own a slab of 'land', or that many universities have classes and events there, or that people are making a living out of selling sex (cueing up robotic sex animations for the pleasure of other patrons), or that terrorists and fascists have set up shop—none of these things constitute events worthy of comment. The real narrative is that the company behind Second Life, Linden Lab, has been able to convince journalists to cover, both online and in print, a service that has at best 200,000 regular users.

Just as Scientology employs continual promises of deliverance to draw the curious upwards into the pyramid, Second Life's logic is in its promotional power. Stories about Armani beginning a shop in Second Life are still stories about advertising without news content. Again, it is a pure study in mise en abyme, much like a film comprised only of credits. Entering the world for the first time is much like watching Johnny Mnemonic (Robert Longo, 1995); there are ads everywhere, nobody can act, and every scene promises entertainment but delivers nothing.

On the flipside, Second Life is extremely accessible and, for the most part, the vast economy is open to all to participate in. The culture is equal parts curious onlookers, sex workers, tinkers and sociologists studying the other three. It benefits from being completely free to try, although to participate in the economy one has to purchase a 'premium' account so that their character receives a stipend of in-game funds. Talk about use value; Karl Marx isn't just turning in his grave, he's going positively centrifugal.

CLOVER'S LEAVES

A few years ago Resident Evil's creator, Shinji Mikami and game auteur Atsushi Inaba helped form a subsidiary of Japanese developer Capcom, Clover Studio, and had remained creatively dormant with a few insipid versions of the game Viewtiful Joe. The studio was recently liquidated by the management of Capcom, but not before it produced two incredible games. Okami's reputation as a critical darling is well deserved, and it probably qualifies as a canonically great interactive experience. You control the goddess Amaterasu in the form of a white wolf in a game world entirely derived from the sumi-e style of Japanese printmaking and your 'Celestial Brush' allows you to create miracles using calligraphic techniques. The refined, gentle atmosphere is as aesthetically breathtaking as the game design is inspiring and the story is subtle. David Surman, senior lecturer in Computer Games Design at the Newport School of Art in the UK, recently described it as 'one important realization of the nebulous ache for games to possess their own history and refuse to be haunted by cinema and television aesthetics'. In the grinding, imbecile wake of Gears of War, Okami is not merely a counterpart, but a literal catastrophe in the aesthetic world of games. It questions the lonely, introverted and violent psychology of gaming actions in the most brutal way: by offering something else.

Which is why Clover's other game of late 2006 is equally brilliant. God Hand, which is punctuated by the sub-title 'Give Evil A Hand', is a tongue-in-cheek homage to anime's stylized violence and cultural catch-all qualities. The paper-thin plot (girl meets boy with artificial arm, boy meets demons, boy kills everybody) is childish yet relentlessly witty. You run between identikit levels, thrashing identikit enemies, and somehow a thoroughly engaging game emerges out of the process. Mechanically, God Hand is a throwback to the epoch of pain - where trigger-happy players had to scale mountains of physical difficulty to assert themselves over an unforgiving and cruel system. Aesthetically, it is situated firmly in the first wave Manga Video tradition of Mad Bull 34 (Osamu Dezaki, 1991), Fist of the North Star (Toyoo Ashida, 1986) and Space Adventure Cobra (Osamu Dezaki, 1982).

Through the abuse of synapse and reflex, the game forces you to undergo a transformation where only the total control of reflexes allows passage forward. It is because of this quality that God Hand offers a distinct comparison to Gears of War, both allow you to stomp on the heads of opponents, and both are rated MA 15+. One is unpretentiously steeped in the slapstick carnivalesque tradition, complete with mustached drag queens and lines such as 'The only thing I'm giving up is an ass-kicking' while the other is a po-faced gore-drenched militaristic and sadomasochistic fantasy that refuses to acknowledge the ideology of violence or give the slightest nod to its obscenely sexualized nature.

Although Clover Studio has disbanded and the staff reformed elsewhere, these two games proffer distinct but equally charged experiences that should by rights define the gaming present, such as it is, rather than the paint-by-numbers action games which attract habitual praise. It is to gaming culture's discredit that it cannot even openly discuss basic issues of aesthetics without worrying about distancing the audience - and it is no surprise that legislators have taken more than a decade to begin to wonder whether responsible adults play games. The sad reality is that the popularity of Cliffty B's cut-stomping opus will, if anything, delay the arrival of a proper adult-oriented ratings system - while more intelligent games are drowned out by the gunfire.

Christian McCrea is a video game theorist and does far too much research.