Commercial game culture is increasingly conditioned along capitalism’s notoriously dehumanizing lines: segmentation, branding, and the conformity of purchase schedules to release schedules. The entire conceit of being interested in mainstream games requires, at least in part, a completely un-ironic internalizing of the codes of capital that goes far beyond the creeping suspicion that perhaps you don’t need that box-set of the first season of Law and Order.

The State of Play

Possession of one game system or another often inspires psychological and social justifications that approach the peculiarities of Ford vs. Holden debates. Sinister patterns emerge in even the most detached gamer; for many, a kind of fealty is sworn over bleeding thumbs to one multi-national corporation over another. This, in turn, helps recapitulate aesthetic and cultural preferences that make iPod accessories look individualistic. What small elements of game culture that corporate culture doesn’t own, it outlaw (piracy), makes obsolete (games older than three years) and then repackages, or sues (player-created content) and then repackages as its own. Television and print game media (we have little of either in Australia) have only now begun to emerge from a completely industry-supported position, and attempts at critical readings of games have not yet found a broad functional base.

Despite the hierarchal control of modes of play, the real fun, as always, is to be found in what the rules do not cover. Game culture, being fed newer and newer technologies on an ever-faster treadmill, revels in its ancestry of simple games, so that techno-fetishism and archaephilia dovetail out of the zone of capital and into play itself. The all-important question of whether ‘equipment empowers the elite’ is never struck dumb – criticality has always been at the heart of computer gameplay, in the Bakhtinian sense that any play threatens the rules which govern the game. Player rebellions in online games, revolts over faulty software, and an online culture that continually breaches the copyright of the same companies it draws from, point to a complex model of ‘contra-industrial’ behaviour that is becoming more tempestuous with every year. As a result, the games industry has had to borrow more than cinema’s stylistics in order to react to the changes. A broad movement away from high-profile games and towards smaller, faster, cheaper online games is causing convulsions in a big-budget, big-studio system that has come to rely wholly on cinematic envy, gore, graphical fidelity and franchise culture. Over the past few years, games have emerged from the commercial system which hint both at gaming’s roots in simple call-and-response objects and musical instruments, and at the potential uses of complex technological frames. Unusual, cheaply produced games from major studios such as Parappa The Rapper, Ico, Rez, Jet Set Radio, and Katamari Damacy have sometimes had to struggle for an audience, but have also often upset the commercial boat while multi-million dollar games sink and take companies with them.

The upcoming Sony game, Shadow of the Colossus, an unofficial sequel to Ico (both directed by Fumito Ueda), offers a rare glimpse into the emotionality at the heart of interactive experiences. In these two games, you are given the barest sense of a character and a grim but humanizing, atmospheric narrative to guide them through. In Ico, you play a nameless boy with horns charged with protecting a sickly female character from shadowy creatures with your trusty lump of wood. Gender politics are deftly and wordlessly drawn out, examined, inverted and collapsed as you clamber out of the fairytale escape from the evil queen’s castle. In Shadow of the Colossus, you play a hunter, complete with horse and bow, who must track down skyscraper-sized monsters and defeat them to save the kingdom. These descriptions are probably more than is needed for either game, precisely because their vagueness provides more room for psychological play. There is a mythic void and simplicity to these stories that is comparable less to motion cinema or television and more to highly detailed shadow-puppetry, such as Sylvère Lotringer’s classic Die Abenteuer Die Prinzen Achmed. In many ways, they represent a formalist approach to game design – meaning that gameplay and narrative have finally stopped focusing on minimal incongruity – and the result is the kind of emotional connection with the characters that is simply impossible to achieve without playing them yourself.

Nowhere are the weird tensions between play and capital more evident than in the ‘don’t ask, but please tell’ world of illegal software, mod-chip culture and import games. Piracy (otherwise known as ‘not paying $100 for software’) is not a problem that needs to be urgently quashed if the media industry is to thrive; rather, it is a part of media life itself. Gamers in Australia found a friend in this regard on the shores of Lake Burley-Griffin, as the High Court proved it was legal for a person to modify something they own – in this case, to remove the region coding on a game console to allow copied discs to be played. Modified consoles allow people to collect games on copied discs and play games from around the world that are usually restricted. This will doubtless change with challenges under the FTA, but, for the moment, Australia has the peculiar distinction of being a country in which many high-profile com-
Computer games are unavailable (second in the Western world only to Germany in the number of games refused classification) but that also allows its citizens to legally defy the structure of the games industry.

Let The Bodies Hit the Senate Floor

For many who have been observing the erratic behaviour of the Office of Film and Literature Classification over the past few years, the game is up. Any pretence towards a legislative approach to new media and computer games was inadvertently dropped in the last year, as a series of classification refusals and media events exposed the bare fact that no consistent approach exists to control, or even understand, the nature of games.

In this year’s typically inane ‘hot coffee’ controversy, the discs containing the game Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas (Rockstar Games, 2004) – a broad parody of the nineties gangster-rap era that gave players a world rife with racial tension and amorality – was found to contain an unused secret section, completely inaccessible, that would have allowed players to have (largely clothed, certainly primitive) sex with your partner. The mere existence of the ‘hot coffee’ material, euphemistically named for the choice you theoretically would have made to play the sex scene, gave legislators all they needed to sprout another seasonal crop of moral panic.

The material was enough for the game to be taken off the shelves in the UK, Germany, US and Australia, where the producers printed the games without the offending code.

By way of illustrating the farcical nature of such a maneuver – which is as much punitive as legislative – a cinematic approximation could be to suggest that behind the couch in a certain scene in Three Men and a Baby, Ted Danson is masturbating quietly, out of shot – and therefore the film needs to be reclassified as unsuitable for children.

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Doubtless, the question of child protection lies at the core of the federal media policy, and informs the processes of the biannual meetings to discuss the classification of games. Since Midway Games’ Mortal Kombat and Sega’s Night Trap in 1993 first irked powerful right-wing parents’ groups – who consistently dominate the debate on games – several opportunities have been missed to create an R18+ rating for games. Under the current system, a game considered R18+ material is simply refused classification. Although a serious movement now exists to correct the imbalance, it comes almost a decade too late, as games have quickly evolved beyond the legislation of the 1990s. While games such as 50 Cent: Bulletproof, N.A.R.C. and Grand Theft Auto may catch the eye of a bored MP, dozens of other games allow players to perform much the same in terms of violence and even sex. In the case of N.A.R.C., the mere idea that the game featured drug use was enough for it to be refused classification. Since the game is also notorious for being woeful in every regard, the black market for this game in Australia through Ebay alone has likely out-stripped whatever meagre number of official copies it would have sold.

Traditionally, these media circuses exist to promote the idea that the government is capable of producing legislation that gives parents choices over what their children play – even with new technologies, Australians are playing games which have no context for classification.
Playstation 3 and the Nintendo Revolutions – the Microsoft Xbox 360, the Sony computer game consoles will be released during the next year, three new competitors will emerge. Whereas a mobile phone will turn a normal person into a boor, a Play Station Portable, Game Boy or Nintendo Revolution console, which is controlled with an inoffensive two-button remote that senses any degree of movement, and forgoes any giant leaps in graphical fidelity. More importantly, they intend to allow owners – ‘Revolutionaries’, if we must – to download hundreds of old games and play them on the new system. The twin obsessions of the simple past and the highly detailed future produce weird terrors in which regular game players will spend more time and money on older games, even if they know they are bad, simply to give themselves distance from the present, which is a form of play in and of itself.

Weird public behaviour is likely to increase as more portable game systems emerge. Whereas a mobile phone will turn a normal person into a boor, a Play Station Portable, Game Boy or Nintendo DS (Dual Screen) is more likely to turn someone into oncoming traffic. Many new games offer wireless network play, so if you happen across a group of silent kids, each staring at a lump of plastic, its either a flash mob or an equally geeky videogame.

Viva La Resolution

During the next year, three new computer game consoles will be released – the Microsoft Xbox 360, the Sony Playstation 3 and the Nintendo Revolutions. The industry has built a system of hardware cycles, where companies aim to have the brightest and best appear on their new machine just in time for a specified holiday, and which have made game culture entirely seasonal in nature. Historically, the real key to the attraction of these systems, and each corporation sees older, simpler software styles as part of its strategy to bring in those who are intimidated by modern game systems and controllers. The stakes go beyond games, as Sony’s Playstation 3 comes equipped to play Blu-Ray discs, one of the formats the Motion Picture Association of America is hoping we’ll take to this time around.

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The Dog on the Xbox

Australia’s game culture is notoriously rife with piracy, but also with the related phenomena of user-level programming and modification, which peculiarly allow a degree of integration with different media cultures and institutions that games would not otherwise have. A fluidity of movement between gameplay and anime/manga subcultures is exaggerated in Australia, due largely to our location, which skews our media fandoms towards Japan. At the same time, many of Australia’s new media artists are taking their cues from game history, which is at once part of a globalizing trend and specifically Japanese in origin, to produce works which rely on interactivity and a sense of fun to interpret and navigate. Our game companies and institutions such as the Australian Centre for the Moving Image and Selectparks have made inroads in expanding our international profile and helping to retrofit a productive game culture that benefits from bonds with other media, but only in as much as it can play around with them.

Videogames are rarely talked about as part of Australia’s screen culture, a situation that is unlikely to change without any television coverage of games that don’t set out to trigger epileptic fits or are saturated in commercial dross. This despite the large number of adults who spend more time swinging a sword or cartwheeling through abstract worlds than in front of televisions. On the other hand, the coming year will likely be a difficult one for anyone who doesn’t play games, as millions will be spent to convince us that we have another forty leisure hours to spare in any given week to lob magical orbs about. If you, like me, aren’t convinced you need the biggest and brightest, perhaps go look in a computer market to see how cheap it is to modify a game console into a box of endless cheap fun – while it’s still legal.

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