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Wolves among us: some brief reflections on the "bona fides" of gendered violence in computer game art

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**WOLVES AMONG US: SOME BRIEF REFLECTIONS ON THE “BONA FIDES” OF
GENDERED VIOLENCE IN COMPUTER GAME ART**

ADAM JARDINE *

The classification of computer games in Australia is a subject of expert discourse, but is not, itself, an expert function. It is carried out by community representatives (the classifiers), speaking for the community of reasonable people and applying their standards, while assessing the “impact” of classifiable elements on both reasonable people and the especially vulnerable. It is an inherently personal analysis, but the personal is an imagined space (the “reasonable person” or “reasonable adult”). This blog or reflection-type article brings the personal back to a real space, of flesh and blood: the author’s. It starts from the author’s experience of discomfort playing three computer games featuring violence against women or girls: The Wolf Among Us, The Walking Dead: Season Two, and The Last of Us. It breaks down the author’s response to understand why he reacted the way he did, focusing, in particular, on his assessment of whether the violence was justified. It then offers some brief suggestions on how such a response could influence classification, given the existing rules: at least if the author’s experience is identifiable with the, or a, reasonable person’s.

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I THE PERSONAL IS ANALYTICAL

This article starts from personal reflections. Specifically, it starts from three experiences of discomfort. They came from three very different scenes: though as I am speaking of an interactive medium, computer games, it would be better to say three very different *plays*.

1. At a major plot point in a detective story, I/my character finds a woman's severed head waiting for me/him on his doorstep. The head appears to be that of his love interest.
2. Partway through the first chapter of a zombie survival tale, my character — this time a young girl — has been bitten by a dog, and must tend to the wound. I/we do so by pouring peroxide into the bite, then suturing the flesh with fishing line.
3. In another zombie survival tale, I again take on the role of a young girl. We are thrown into a deadly struggle with a cannibal, kidnapper and potential rapist (all in one). I am not quick enough on the buttons: he impales me/her with a machete.

On the face of it, a personal experience of discomfort proves little to lawmakers, policy makers, decision makers or academics about how computer games should be regulated. Shock, disappointment and “ick” are thin ice from which to generalise. In truth, though, that is how classification proceeds. The Australian classification scheme gives the classifiers three options for a computer game: censor it (classify it RC — ‘Refused

Classification'), regulate it to encourage age-appropriate use (classify it R 18+ — 'Restricted' or MA 15+ — 'Mature Accompanied'), or give it an advisory rating (classify it M, PG or G — 'Mature', 'Parental Guidance' or 'General').¹ The decision is based on the 'impact'² of 'classifiable elements' (themes, violence, sex, language, drug use, and nudity),³ and potentially ick-based standards like morality, decency and propriety.⁴ Objectivity is supplied by the classifiers (the Classification Board and its Review Board) occupying the imagined space of the reasonable person.⁵ They speak not for themselves, but it: thus, the community of reasonable people (of whom they should be 'broadly representative').⁶ However, they are not (necessarily) social scientists. They have limited inroads into that imagined space, and limited insight. Their most intuitive point of access would be juror's logic. 'The standard I apply is reasonable doubt; I am a reasonable person; if I have doubt, reasonable doubt exists' becomes: 'The standard I apply is the reasonable person's reaction; I am a reasonable person; my reactions are the reasonable person's' (thus, the community's).⁷

In this article, I will analyse my experiences of discomfort as a gamer sensitive to gendered violence, and how such reactions could influence a classifier applying the *Classification Act* and its accompanying rules.⁸

II UNCOMFORTABLE GAMES

Incident one comes from *The Wolf Among Us*, a "hard-boiled" detective story set in the world of Bill Willingham's *Fables* comics. It is populated by gritty versions of fairy tale and nursery rhyme characters, such as Georgie Porgie, Beauty and the Beast, and the Little Mermaid. The player's role is that of Bigby Wolf (the Big Bad Wolf), Fabletown's

¹ *Classification (Publications, Films and Computer Games) Act 1995* (Cth) s 7(3) ('*Classification Act*'); *Guidelines for the Classification of Computer Games 2012* (Cth) ('*Game Guidelines*') 10.

² *Game Guidelines* 5.

³ *Ibid* 7.

⁴ *Classification Act* s 11(a).

⁵ *Ibid* (speaking of 'the standards of morality, decency and propriety generally accepted by reasonable adults').

⁶ *Classification Act* s 48(2): 'In appointing members, regard is to be had to the desirability of ensuring that the membership of the [Classification] Board is broadly representative of the Australian community.' See also s 74(2) regarding the Review Board.

⁷ In contrast, the *Guidelines for the Classification of Publications 2005* (Cth) ('*Publications Guidelines*') describe a 'reasonable adult' as one '[p]ossessing common sense and an open mind', and 'able to balance personal opinion with generally accepted community standards' (at 18), but do not indicate *how* the balance should be struck or what a well-balanced decision looks like.

⁸ *National Classification Code 2005* (Cth) ('*Classification Code*'); *Game Guidelines*. See *Classification Act* ss 9, 12.

sheriff. He works alongside Snow White, the assistant to the deputy mayor and his partner in a lukewarm romantic subplot,⁹ to investigate the murder of a sex worker. The scene occurs at the climax of chapter one. Bigby is distraught at the thought Snow has been decapitated, but discovers that the victim is actually a troll prostitute magically “glamoured” to look like her. Most episodes are rated ‘MA’ for ‘Strong violence, coarse language and sexual references’.¹⁰

Incident two is from *The Walking Dead: Season Two* (based on Robert Kirkman’s comics). The protagonist is Clementine. In season one, the player, stepping into the shoes of an adult male (and ex-convict) named Lee, escorts Clementine through a zombie apocalypse. Lee dies in the final chapter. In season two, there is no proxy; the player “protects” Clementine by making her decisions directly. All its episodes are rated ‘R’ for ‘high impact violence’.

Incident three is from *The Last of Us*, a survival/stealth game. The player adopts the role of grizzled survivor Joel, who lost his daughter when the world succumbed to hordes of “Infected” (essentially, zombies created by an odd fungus). He escorts Ellie, a teenage girl, to a rendezvous with the rebel Fireflies, who may be able to synthesise a cure from her remarkable immunity. It is also rated ‘R’ for ‘high impact violence’.

III UNCOMFORTABLE GAMING

My response to Snow’s severed head differed substantially from Bigby’s. It was mostly disappointment. I was (and am) a fan of the *Fables* universe. I liked walking in it. I liked seeing the interpretation the developers had placed on each of the characters, and the stories they could create with them. The head felt cheap, dirty: even lazy. It was a tired trope (sometimes called ‘Women in Refrigerators’): the murder and mutilation of a potential lover, giving the male protagonist motivation and the male player stakes.¹¹ It

⁹ In the “canon” of the comics, they become lovers, spouses, and parents: but the game is set at an earlier point.

¹⁰ There is a searchable database of classification decisions on the Australian Government’s classification website: Australian Government, *Welcome to Australian Classification*, Australian Classification <<http://www.classification.gov.au/Pages/Home.aspx>>.

¹¹ An excellent breakdown of this trope is available as a vlog or transcript on Anita Sarkeesian’s *Feminist Frequency* site: *Damsel in Distress (Part 2): Tropes vs Women* (28 May 2013) *Feminist Frequency: Conversations with Pop Culture* <<http://www.feministfrequency.com/2013/05/damsel-in-distress-part-2-tropes-vs-women/#more-7505>>. “The term “Women in Refrigerators” was coined in the late 1990s by comic book writer Gail Simone to describe the trend of female comic book characters who are routinely brutalized or killed-off as a plot device designed to move the male character’s story arc forward. The

was not even the trope's first appearance: I had already found the head of a visibly battered prostitute I saved from an abuser in the opening scene and gave some cash to (so she could pay off her pimp). I was, to engage the scheme's definition of offensive,¹² disgusted, but not really outraged. I was too weary for that.

Clementine's "first aid" had a different effect. I poured hydrogen peroxide into an open wound and sutured it up, stitch by stitch, as a girl shrieked, sobbed and almost passed out. I found that profoundly disturbing. Part of it was a simple empathic response to pain. Part of it, though, was that I was causing pain to a young girl for my own entertainment. Games are interactive: the player is inherently complicit to some degree (one reason they are thought, generically, to be of higher impact than films, and of greater concern to the community).¹³ I did not intentionally play the game in such a way that I would have to do it, and I had no option for avoiding it if I wanted to advance the story. I was, however, the one who clicked: thus, the one who stitched.

Ellie's impaling provided the most impact of the three, because it was both unexpected and graphic. I did not respond to the graphic nature of the scene per se, though. The game is filled with blasts of equal savagery, especially if one is not particularly good at it. (The penalty for not fighting off Infected is watching the protagonist be eaten.) The distinction is that most of it is either dished out by Joel or directed at him. Violence against a male protagonist is the norm in violent computer games. I have played through many such sequences, in many such games, without flinching. *The Last of Us* has the player take control of Ellie for a substantial stretch, and watching a teenage girl be brutalised is difficult. It was not much easier watching her be cannibalised when my performance was not up to scratch, though at least I could see that coming.

IV THE BONA FIDES OF GENDERED VIOLENCE

'Bona fide' art, that which has 'artistic merit', and that which is justified by purpose or context, is classified leniently.¹⁴ 'Gratuitous' material is not.¹⁵ Gratuitous means beyond

trope name comes from *Green Lantern* issue #54, in which the superhero returns home to find his girlfriend murdered and stuffed inside his refrigerator.'

¹² *Game Guidelines* 14.

¹³ Ibid 6. '[T]here are differences in what some sections of the community condone in relation to passive viewing or the effects passive viewing may have on the viewer (as may occur in a film) compared to actively controlling outcomes by making choices to take or not take action.'

¹⁴ *Classification Act* s 11(b); *Game Guidelines* 5, 7, 14 (definition of 'exploitative').

what is necessary, and *necessary* must be judged relative to a purpose.¹⁶ The *Game Guidelines*, like their equivalent for films¹⁷ but unlike their equivalent for publications,¹⁸ do not speak of “bona fide art” expressly, which could be a telling omission. Artistic merit is still relevant to their classification on the scheme’s face, though, so games can, at least, have an artistic *purpose*.¹⁹

The context justification is construed liberally. For example, violence may be justified where an ‘alien themed first-person shooter’ needs it; the boards do not consider whether the community needs alien themed first-person shooters.²⁰ The scheme’s target seems to be either illicit purposes (like promoting violence),²¹ or ick included for its own sake: elements that are, in essence, masturbatory, engaging no “higher” faculties and having no point beyond titillation (broadly interpreted).

What unified my response to the disturbing sequences was that at no point did I believe the creators were being deliberately misogynistic. Violence against females was not packaged as an acceptable way to respond to them (what they “had coming”), or an effective way to control them. Nor did I interpret the violence as gratuitous, in the sense

¹⁵ *Game Guidelines* 10, 12–13.

¹⁶ It is defined for the purpose of classifying publications in terms of “[m]aterial which is unwarranted or uncalled for, and included without the justification of a defensible story-line or artistic merit”: *Publications Guidelines* 17.

¹⁷ *Guidelines for the Classification of Films 2012* (Cth).

¹⁸ *Publications Guidelines* 5, 7, 16–17.

¹⁹ Whether games are “art” in a broad, non-legal sense is beyond the scope of this article, but it does raise some interesting points on both sides. See Jonathan Jones, ‘Santa Bought Me a PlayStation. But It’s Still Not Art’ on Jonathan Jones, *Jonathan Jones on Art (Guardian)* (7 January 2014) <<http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2014/jan/07/playstation-video-games-art>>; Keith Stuart, ‘Video Games and Art: Why Does the Media Get It So Wrong?’ on Keith Stuart, *Games Blog (Guardian)* (9 January 2014) <<http://www.theguardian.com/technology/gamesblog/2014/jan/08/video-games-art-and-the-shock-of-the-new>>.

²⁰ Classification Review Board, *Decision — Alien Rage* (18 November 2013) 4. See also Classification Review Board, *Decision — God Mode* (19 November 2013) 4 (violence ‘justified by the fantasy context of escaping a range of beasts in the Maze of Hades’); Classification Review Board, *Decision — House of the Dead: Overkill Extended Cut* (26 September 2011) 4 (violence justified by ‘the fantasy zombie horror, “rail shooter” context’); Classification Review Board, *Decision — Killer is Dead* (18 November 2013) 5 (violence justified by context in ‘a hack and slash game featuring cyborg humans’); Classification Review Board, *Decision — Mortal Kombat* (14 March 2011) 7 (majority concludes that violence is *not* justified by a stylised fantasy context, but note that this decision predates the introduction of an ‘R 18+’ category for games); Classification Review Board, *Decision — The Walking Dead* (19 November 2013) 5 (violence justified in a ‘zombie horror game’: specifically, the first season of *The Walking Dead* games referred to in the main text); Classification Review Board, *Decision — The Walking Dead: Survival Instinct* (2 December 2013) 4 (violence justified by the ‘zombie horror genre’; this game has little to do with the other *Walking Dead* titles mentioned here, and is based on the television show rather than the comics); Classification Review Board, *Decision — Tom Clancy’s Splinter Cell: Blacklist* (12 December 2013) 5 (violence ‘justified by the context of the theme of eliminating terrorist adversaries’).

²¹ See, *Classification Code* cl 1(d)(i).

that it existed for no other purpose than sensation or gut impact. In *The Wolf Among Us* and *The Last of Us*, it is about stakes. The player must understand that violence against women and girls is horrendous to invest in the stakes the developer sets up (and thus continue with the next chapter or develop the skill not to fail), as in the notorious *Tomb Raider* reboot (where the range of challenges experienced by a more vulnerable Lara Croft extended to fending off attempted rape).²² The flesh-sewing in *The Walking Dead* is *sensational*, but it is not erotic, or *just* there for a thrill. It is not masturbatory in that way. It is part of the survival horror narrative: *this* is how bad things have gotten, and *this* is what you must do to survive.

What I *felt* was that violence against females was being spent cheaply. Violence is a large, and gendered, problem in Australia. Approximately 34 per cent of women have suffered physical violence, and 19 per cent have suffered sexual violence, since age 15, based on the ABS's 2012 *Personal Safety Survey*.²³ Men are more likely to have experienced the first type (48 per cent), but only 4.5 per cent have experienced the second.²⁴ They are much more likely to be the perpetrators, whether the target be a man or a woman.²⁵ Misogynistic violence is also increasingly recognised as a problem in the international gaming community. Women are made victims both inside and outside game worlds, by developers and gamers respectively. The recent "Gamergate" controversy — sparked by a disgruntled ex-boyfriend's (probably spurious)²⁶ implication that developer Zoe Quinn traded sex for favourable reviews — brought this into sharp relief with the torrent of threats (including rape threats) she and other prominent women in gaming circles (like feminist blogger Anita Sarkeesian) received.²⁷

²² See Jason Schreier, 'You'll "Want to Protect" the New, Less Curvy Lara Croft' on *Kotaku* (11 June 2012) <<http://kotaku.com/5917400/youll-want-to-protect-the-new-less-curvy-lara-croft>>. After an outcry, the creators disputed the "rape" characterisation and blamed it on poor phrasing: see Jason Schreier, 'Tomb Raider Creators Say "Rape" Is Not a Word in Their Vocabulary' on *Kotaku* (29 June 2012) <<http://kotaku.com/5922228/tomb-raider-creators-say-rape-is-not-a-word-in-their-vocabulary>>.

²³ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 4906.0 — *Personal Safety, Australia, 2012: Measuring the Prevalence of Violence* (31 July 2014) <<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4906.0Chapter2002012>>. 'Violence' for these purposes includes threats.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 4906.0 — *Personal Safety, Australia, 2012: Perpetrators of Violence* (31 July 2014) <<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4906.0Chapter3002012>>; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 4906.0 — *Personal Safety, Australia, 2012: Data Cubes* (31 July 2014) table 6 <<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/4906.02012>>.

²⁶ Stephen Totilo, 'In Recent Days I've Been Asked Several Times about a Possible Breach of Ethics Involving One of Our Reporters' on *Kotaku* (20 August 2014) <<http://kotaku.com/in-recent-days-ive-been-asked-several-times-about-a-pos-1624707346>>.

²⁷ See Nate Rott, '#Gamergate Controversy Fuels Debate on Women and Video Games' on *All Tech Considered (npr)* (24 September 2014)

Violence against women is an issue with weight. To use it as a cheap plot device or contrivance strikes a sour note.

Art — even purportedly “low art” like computer games — can be used to address social problems. (Indeed, Quinn attempted to do just that with her “indie” title *Depression Quest*.) That might make people uncomfortable: and people might *need* to be made uncomfortable for the point to come across. I do not believe any of the material I have addressed was trying to make a point about gendered violence, though. It did not offer any insight (at least not intentionally). The games relied on it for narrative purposes, or to strike the audience in the gut, but did not say much about what lies beneath. If the material was there for an artistic purpose, it was, I suggest, neither a novel nor a valuable one.

V IMPLICATIONS FOR CLASSIFICATION AND CENSORSHIP

Selling gendered violence cheaply or without good cause could not be reason enough to ban or harshly restrict a game, except in extreme cases. Too much would have to fall with the one. The *Classification Code* accepts that adults should be able to ‘read, hear, see and play what they want’;²⁸ it does not ask them expressly to justify why they want it (even if that is the overall effect of the scheme).

However, the classifiers can account for a cheap sell in various ways, of which the following are just some brief suggestions. First, when assessing the impact or effect an element has on a reasonable person, they can account for the fact violence against women is a community problem. Thus, the community is sensitive to unwarranted gendered violence in art (and not just condoning of or inciting to sexual violence, already targeted by the Code).²⁹ Second, they may need to assess the impact or effect of an element on a particular *segment* of the community: in particular, the intended or likely audience.³⁰ A woman or a reasonable woman may have a stronger negative reaction to unwarranted gendered violence, as a potential victim, than a man, as a potential perpetrator. If a violent representation does cross into the realm of

<<http://www.npr.org/blogs/alltechconsidered/2014/09/24/349835297/-gamergate-controversy-fuels-debate-on-women-and-video-games>>.

²⁸ *Classification Code* cl 1(a); Explanatory Statement, *Guidelines for the Classification of Computer Games 2012* (Cth) 7.

²⁹ *Classification Code* cl 1(d)(i).

³⁰ *Classification Act* s 11(d).

masturbation — is “titillating” in a broad or narrow sense — it may have a powerful influence on young boys, primed to respond to it by a mediascape littered with gendered violence packaged as entertainment. Third, in assessing artistic merit, what challenges assumptions or shines light on an issue might be of greater merit than tropes. One unit of dissent/dissonance contributes more to dialogue, by virtue of its scarcity, than one unit of consensus/resonance. Fourth, classified texts bear consumer advice to warn audiences of harmful or disturbing material: and gendered violence deserves a place in the mix. It seems odd to caution consumers about something as benign as an errant “shit” or “fuck”, and not touch upon the specifically gendered nature of a punch, or torture, or a killing.

The games I have addressed are not outliers in modern gaming. Each is easily available, via download or in hard copy, for multiple systems (such as PC, Xbox consoles and Playstation consoles).³¹ Each was well-received.³² (Indeed, *The Last of Us* is touted as among the best games ever produced for the PS3.)³³ Each of them has a lot to offer, and I enjoyed each through to completion. But to borrow Anita Sarkeesian’s disclaimer from her *Tropes versus Women* vlogs,³⁴ it is entirely possible to love something while pointing out its flaws. A patriot shows love for their country by trying to fix what is wrong, not by blinding themselves to it. It is in that spirit I offer this piece.

³¹ *The Last of Us* is only available for Playstation consoles (3 and 4).

³² For example, on IGN, episode one of *The Wolf Among Us* received a rating of 9/10; episode one of *The Walking Dead, Season Two* received 8/10; *The Last of Us* received a perfect 10. See Marty Sliva, *The Wolf Among Us Episode 1: Faith Review, ‘The Fairest of Them All’* (10 October 2013) IGN <<http://au.ign.com/articles/2013/10/10/the-wolf-among-us-episode-1-faith-review>>; Mitch Dyer, *The Walking Dead: Season 2, Episode 1 Review, ‘Girl, Interrupted’* (17 December 2013) IGN <<http://au.ign.com/articles/2013/12/17/the-walking-dead-season-2-episode-1-review>>; Colin Moriarty, *The Last of Us Review, ‘Survival of the Fittest’* (5 June 2013) IGN <<http://au.ign.com/articles/2013/06/05/the-last-of-us-review>>.

³³ It was described in Colin Moriarty’s IGN review as ‘a masterpiece, PlayStation 3’s best exclusive and an absolute must-play’: Moriarty, above n 32.

³⁴ Available from *Feminist Frequency: Home*, Feminist Frequency: Conversations with Pop Culture <<http://www.feministfrequency.com>>.

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