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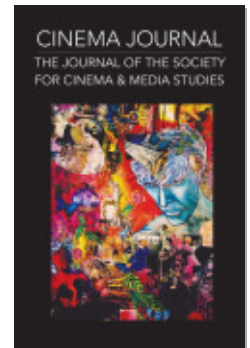
## Roger Ebert and the Games-as-Art Debate

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Cinema Journal, Volume 57, Number 3, Spring 2018, pp. 77-100 (Article)

Published by University of Texas Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2018.0032>



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# Roger Ebert and the Games-as-Art Debate

by FELAN PARKER

**Abstract:** This article examines the cultural legitimization of digital games, and how film critic Roger Ebert became the unlikely antagonist in a heated popular debate about games and art between 2005 and 2010. Although most scholars dismiss this debate as ignorant and misguided, it reveals much about colloquial notions of art and aesthetics, and it has had far-reaching implications for popular discourse on games. Framed by the Ebert debate, the article analyzes arguments for and against games as art in terms of their sociocultural significance and concludes by arguing that the debate is an important factor in the recent history of gaming culture.

Cultural perspectives on digital games have changed significantly in the past forty years.<sup>1</sup> For much of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, the mainstream media portrayed digital games as potentially harmful to children and detrimental to society.<sup>2</sup> When journalists did contest these claims or push back against the broader cultural anxiety about games, it was usually in terms of the potential health or educational benefits of games to children or society, emphasizing their instrumental rather than aesthetic value, a strategy that has also been noted in popular discourse around television.<sup>3</sup> The moral panic about games persisted into the 2000s, but in the past fifteen years or so, coinciding with the economic growth of the game industry and the demographic expansion (and fragmentation) of the audience for games, “an alternative narrative appear[ed] . . . that characterizes video games as a valuable artistic form.”<sup>4</sup> This article examines popular discourses around the question of digital games’ legitimacy as art, focusing on the sustained controversy around influential *Chicago Sun-Times* film critic and television personality

1 “Digital games” is a blanket term for all forms of video, console, computer, and mobile games. Unless otherwise indicated, “games” in this article refers to digital games.

2 Brian McKernan, “The Morality of Play: Video Game Coverage in *The New York Times* from 1980 to 2010,” *Games and Culture*, July 31, 2013, 3, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412013493133>.

3 *Ibid.*, 15; Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine, *Legitimizing Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 3.

4 McKernan, “Morality of Play,” 2.

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Roger Ebert's notorious assertion that games can never be art. Ebert's fandom-baiting comments between 2005 and 2010 bookend an intense period of debate about games and art involving journalists, critics, academics, and gaming enthusiasts. Not coincidentally, this was also a transitional moment in gaming culture, with the diversification of the gaming market, the release and positive reception of several blockbuster "prestige" games, the rise of independent games and other alternative game-making practices, and steadily increasing interest in the artistic potential of games among game developers, enthusiasts, critics, academics, artists, curators, and cultural institutions, all contributing to a sense of urgency over the status of the medium.<sup>5</sup> By 2010, Ebert had bowed out of the debate in exasperation, but this has not stopped him from being invoked regularly as a convenient villain in the ongoing drama of games' legitimation. I contend that the Ebert affair, in all its sprawling messiness, defined the boundaries of popular discourse on games and art and can be productively read as an expression of persistent concerns around cultural and aesthetic legitimacy.

In this article, I broadly trace the history and context of the debate about games and art during this period, examining a range of arguments and positions. This survey is based on an exhaustive critical discourse analysis of dozens of journalistic, critical, and academic articles, blog posts, and other documents responding to Ebert and the question of games as art, supplemented by hundreds of posts in online forum discussions and comment threads. Teasing out the commonsense notions of what art is and how it works that are embedded in these scattered debates is crucial to understanding the ongoing cultural legitimation of games. As Haidee Wasson argues, claiming any cultural object to be art or not art, valuable or worthless, is "a productive cultural moment, systematically forming the objects being discussed," and furthermore, this discursive forming has material implications for the actors involved, in the form of allocation of social prestige and resources, hence their deep personal investment.<sup>6</sup> My work here is indebted to recent work that builds on the cultural sociology of Pierre Bourdieu to examine the cultural legitimation of film, television, and comics—all popular media forms that have undergone major changes in status and thus represent useful historical parallels to digital games.<sup>7</sup>

Historically, digital games have occupied a very low place in the cultural hierarchy, somewhere in the neighborhood of *Archie* comics and slasher films, and, like these other forms, they have not historically been part of the complex system of institutions

5 Jesper Juul, *A Casual Revolution: Reinventing Video Games and Their Players* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012); Felan Parker, "Canonizing Bioshock: Cultural Value and the Prestige Game," *Games and Culture*, August 30, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412015598669>; Brendan Keogh, "Between Triple-A, Indie, Casual, and DIY: Sites of Tension in the Videogames Cultural Industry," in *The Routledge Companion to the Cultural Industries*, ed. Kate Oakley and Justin O'Connor (New York: Routledge, 2015), 152–162.

6 Haidee Wasson, *Museum Movies: The Museum of Modern Art and the Birth of Art Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 27; Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 135; Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 310.

7 Wasson, *Museum Movies*; Shyon Baumann, *Hollywood Highbrow: From Entertainment to Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Newman and Levine, *Legitimizing Television*; Bart Beaty, *Unpopular Culture: Transforming the European Comic Book in the 1990s* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007); Bart Beaty, *Comics versus Art* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012).

and actors that constitutes certain forms of art as high culture, commonly known as the “art world.”<sup>8</sup> It is outside of the scope of this article to examine the roots of this low cultural status in detail, but I briefly outline how a number of long-standing cultural and aesthetic prejudices have manifested in contemporary debates about games and art. Although some aspects of games have been identified as valuable or useful, such as the supposed benefit to “hand-eye coordination,”<sup>9</sup> the dominant view of games, much like television and other popular media, has been “as a waste of time at best, and possibly also a source of serious and widespread social problems.”<sup>10</sup> Bart Beaty argues that the cultural “under-achievement” of comics has little to do with any inherent aesthetic shortcomings “but is rooted in the differential power relations of [art forms] competing for cultural resources and prestige.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, strong arguments against games as art from mainstream media pundits like Ebert only emerged after digital games achieved a degree of social and economic prominence over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, in part because the people involved in making and playing games had not previously solicited recognition or legitimacy outside of the relatively narrow world of gaming (much like comics before the 1970s and 1980s).<sup>12</sup> Once game makers and players hoping to legitimate their hobby began to push the idea of games as art into the wider popular sphere, potentially threatening the established cultural order, a backlash was practically inevitable.

It is tempting to write off this ongoing debate as tiresome, an irritating distraction from more substantive discussions, and indeed, working through the sources for this article has been a headache-inducing process. Even some fans reject the quest for legitimacy as meaningless and pretentious, complaining that “games are supposed to be fun, not art.”<sup>13</sup> Scholars and intellectuals react to the debate with eye-rolling derision, bemoaning the persistence of the debate and the woeful inadequacy of the arguments on both sides, and frustratedly pointing out that art has never been a fixed concept, especially in the wake of the artistic upheavals of the twentieth century.<sup>14</sup> The best academic work on games and art completely sidesteps the popular debate, opting for nuance in place of bombast. Celia Pearce, Mary Flanagan, John Sharp, and Henry Lowood, among others, have mobilized concepts from game studies, art history, critical theory, and aesthetic philosophy to trace the history of game-based

8 Thierry Groensteen, *Un objet culturel non identifié* (Angoulême, France: Éditions de l'An 2, 2006), 23, cited in Beaty, *Comics versus Art*, 19.

9 McKernan, “Morality of Play,” 15.

10 Newman and Levine, *Legitimizing Television*, 3.

11 Beaty, *Comics versus Art*, 44.

12 *Ibid.*, 24.

13 Mikey Neuman, “Are Videogames Art, and an Explanation as to Why That Question Is Retarded,” *Destructoid*, January 27, 2010, <http://www.destructoid.com/are-videogames-art-and-an-explanation-as-to-why-that-question-is-retarded-161770.html>; Jexhius, “Not This Again: Ebert: Video Games Can Never Be Art,” *NeoGAF*, April 17, 2010, <http://www.neogaf.com/forum/showthread.php?t=393040>.

14 Ian Bogost, Michael Nitsche, and John Sharp, “What Is an Art History of Games?” (Art History of Games Symposium, High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA, 2010); Jim Preston, “The Arty Party,” *GamaSutra*, February 11, 2008, [http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/3536/the\\_arty\\_party.php](http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/3536/the_arty_party.php); Nick Montfort and Mia Consalvo, “The Dreamcast, Console of the Avant-Garde,” *Loading . . . Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association* 6, no. 9 (2012): 86, <http://journals.sfu.ca/loading/index.php/loading/article/view/104>.

art—finding precedents in the work of Marcel Duchamp, the surrealists, and Fluxus—and to explore how games are being used as a medium for art in various contemporary contexts.<sup>15</sup> This body of work has much to recommend it, but in ignoring the popular discourse, an opportunity for critical inquiry is lost. As the philosopher of art David Novitz suggests, disputes over artistic status are inflected by the fundamental beliefs and values of the participants, and offer a way in to understanding “how and why we classify objects and activities as works of art” in the first place.<sup>16</sup> I want to stress that my goal here is to unpack the debate and its significance as a sociocultural phenomenon rather than respond to Ebert or present a new account of games as art as other scholars have done. My concern here is not with formal theories of art and aesthetics but with how the idea of art is mobilized in everyday, colloquial discourse. A vitriolic public argument about the artistic status of a new medium in the twenty-first century is unquestionably strange, frustrating, and seemingly unnecessary, and it is precisely this strangeness that makes it worthy of investigation.

I begin with a brief chronological account of Ebert’s (in)famous comments about games, and the ensuing backlash and debate. In the subsequent sections, I follow the threads of this discourse, identifying the most common objections and obstacles to the idea of games as art, the most common responses to these objections, and the different kinds of defensive arguments for games as art made by fans and other invested parties. Although Ebert would ultimately capitulate and remove himself from the conversation, his high-profile comments have been and continue to be a powerful catalyst for both opponents and proponents of games as art. The article concludes with a consideration of the implications of the debate for gaming culture and what it says about dominant popular conceptions of art.

**Ebert versus Games.** More than anyone else, Roger Ebert (Figure 1) has come to embody the prejudice against digital games as art. Even today, blog posts and academic articles about games and art habitually position the critic as a central figure in the legitimation narrative. In fact, the cultural backlash against games had been developing for some time before Ebert entered the debate, as an extension of 1990s moral panic about the effects of media violence on children.<sup>17</sup> As early as 2000, *Newsweek* film and drama critic Jack Kroll wrote a derisive editorial about the game industry’s purported pretensions to art status, which was met with anger and incredulity on gaming websites.<sup>18</sup> It was not until 2005, however, that the debate hit the mainstream, when Ebert published the first in a series of inflammatory comments about games. Whether

15 Celia Pearce, “Games as Art: The Aesthetics of Play,” *Visible Language* 40, no. 1 (2006): 67–89; Mary Flanagan, *Critical Play: Radical Game Design* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009); John Sharp, *Works of Game: On the Aesthetics of Games and Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015); Henry Lowood, “Players Are Artists, Too” (Art History of Games Symposium, High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA, 2010).

16 David Novitz, “Disputes about Art,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 54, no. 2 (1996): 153, 162.

17 McKernan, “Morality of Play,” 11.

18 Jack Kroll, “‘Emotion Engine’? I Don’t Think So,” *Newsweek*, March 5, 2000, <http://www.newsweek.com/emotion-engine-i-dont-think-so-156675>; Brendan McGrath, “How Ironic: A Response to Jack Kroll’s Editorial,” *RPGamer*, 2000, <http://www.rpgamer.com/editor/2000/q1/031000bm.html>; Chris Jones, “Double Agent: I Know Why You Want to Hate Me,” *Gaming Intelligence Agency*, April 3, 2000, <http://thegia.psy-q.ch/sites/www.thegia.com/letters/0004/03.html>.

because of Ebert's high profile and large readership, or because of growing anxiety among game developers and fans over social acceptance and cultural legitimacy, Ebert quickly became a galvanizing antagonist for those in favor of games as art. For better or for worse, Ebert's comments dictated the parameters for artistic legitimacy in the popular debate, and this has shaped subsequent discourse.

In fall 2005, Ebert published a one-star review of *Doom* (Andrzej Bartkowiak, 2005), the movie adaptation of the influential first-person shooter, which contained some vaguely derogatory statements about its source material and the "video game-like" quality of its narrative and images.<sup>19</sup> Although the film was also poorly received by fans of the game, the negative review sparked a small furor over Ebert's apparently low opinion of digital games.<sup>20</sup> Ebert's first direct comments on the subject of games and art were published the following week in his "Movie Answer Man" column, in response to reader letters arguing that the *Doom* review was ill informed. Ebert wrote back that games are an objectively less important medium than film or literature and that no worthy examples of games existed that could hope to compete with established art forms: "As long as there is a great movie unseen or a great book unread, I will continue to be unable to find the time to play video games."<sup>21</sup> Letter writers complained about Ebert's obvious lack of familiarity with games, pointing to critically acclaimed, emotionally impactful, and stylish examples such as Nintendo's iconic *Mario* and *Legend of Zelda* franchises, and the moody fantasy role-playing and adventure games *Final Fantasy VII* (Square, 1997), *Shadow of the Colossus* (Team ICO, 2005), and *ICO* (Team ICO, 2001) as evidence of the medium's potential. Some also appealed to authority, noting the growing body of critical and academic work on games. Ebert grudgingly acknowledged the possibility for visual beauty in games but continued to argue that they were more technical craft than art form and ultimately a waste of time.<sup>22</sup>



Figure 1. A memorial statue of Roger Ebert giving his trademark "thumbs up" outside the Virginia Theater in Champaign, Illinois (© Bordwall / Wikimedia Commons / CC BY-SA 4.0, 2015).

19 Roger Ebert, "Doom Movie Review & Film Summary (2005)," *RogerEbert.com*, October 20, 2005, <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/doom-2005>.

20 Jessica Aldred, "'I Don't Enjoy Watching a Bunch of Strangers Bastardize My Baby Any More Than You Do': The Doom Film, Doom Fans and Convergence-Era Media Consumption" (Film Studies Association of Canada Graduate Colloquium, University of Toronto, 2008).

21 Roger Ebert, "Movie Answer Man: Critics vs. Gamers on 'Doom,'" *RogerEbert.com*, October 30, 2005, <http://www.rogerebert.com/answer-man/critics-vs-gamers-on-doom>; Roger Ebert, "Movie Answer Man: Why Did the Chicken Cross the Genders?," *RogerEbert.com*, November 27, 2005, <http://www.rogerebert.com/answer-man/why-did-the-chicken-cross-the-genders>.

22 Roger Ebert, "Movie Answer Man: A Buddhist Walks into a Chat Room . . .," *RogerEbert.com*, November 13, 2005, <http://www.rogerebert.com/answer-man/a-buddhist-walks-into-a-chat-room->.

The ensuing outburst from enraged gaming enthusiasts in forum discussions and blog posts was small compared to future incidents, but just as vitriolic, including many variations on the theme of “Screw you, old man!”<sup>23</sup> Although Ebert’s website did not have a built-in commenting system at the time, his web team took full advantage of the controversy, publishing some of the more civil responses (for and against) in a series of blog posts and fanning the flames of discontent.<sup>24</sup> Many respondents trumpeted the fact that games were a “multi-billion dollar industry” rivaling Hollywood, often implying that Ebert’s comments derived from an anxiety about film being made obsolete by interactive media.<sup>25</sup> “Are video games art?” articles and editorials about the debate became a fixture of gaming news outlets and Ebert’s stance on games became tied to his persona and a regular subject of discussion in his public appearances.<sup>26</sup>

One of Ebert’s most prominent “opponents” around this time was the horror novelist, filmmaker, and occasional game designer Clive Barker, who publicly denounced Ebert’s position and argued for the artistic importance of games in 2007. Barker drew parallels to the cultural prejudice against the horror genre, concluding, endless debates aside, that “if the experience moves you in some way or another . . . even if it moves your bowels . . . I think it is worthy of some serious study.”<sup>27</sup> Ebert apparently could not resist this bait and wrote a lengthy, sardonic point-by-point rebuttal of Barker’s argument. Elaborating on his earlier comments, Ebert proposed that games cannot be “high art, as I understand it,” as opposed to art in the more general sense, a concession that did little to prevent further backlash.<sup>28</sup> This wave of the debate is similar in character to what came before, but some counterarguments also began to focus on the artistic possibilities of independent and experimental games, which were rising in prominence at the time.<sup>29</sup> In the midst of the outcry, *Wired* editor Chris Baker coyly republished a positive computer game review Ebert had written for the magazine a decade earlier, a story that circulated widely.<sup>30</sup>

23 Stealth43, November 29, 2005, comment on “Ebert: Games Inferior to Movies,” *Kotaku*, December 2, 2005, <http://web.archive.org/web/20051202022817/http://www.kotaku.com/gaming/culture/ebert-games-inferior-to-movies-139980.php>.

24 “Gamers Fire Flaming Posts, E-Mails . . .,” *RogerEbert.com*, December 6, 2005, <http://www.rogerebert.com/rogers-journal/gamers-fire-flaming-posts-e-mails>; “The Art of the Game 2,” *RogerEbert.com*, December 8, 2005, <http://www.rogerebert.com/rogers-journal/the-art-of-the-game-2>; “The Game of Art 3,” *RogerEbert.com*, December 14, 2005, <http://www.rogerebert.com/rogers-journal/the-game-of-art-3>.

25 Matt Sakey, “The War of Art,” *IGDA—Culture Clash*, February 18, 2006, [http://web.archive.org/web/20060218100639/http://www.igda.org/columns/clash/clash\\_Jan06.php](http://web.archive.org/web/20060218100639/http://www.igda.org/columns/clash/clash_Jan06.php).

26 “Ebert: Games Inferior to Movies,” *Kotaku*, December 2, 2005, <http://web.archive.org/web/20051202022817/http://www.kotaku.com/gaming/culture/ebert-games-inferior-to-movies-139980.php>; Jeremy Reimer, “Roger Ebert Says Games Will Never Be as Worthy as Movies,” *Ars Technica*, November 30, 2005, <http://arstechnica.com/uncategorized/2005/11/5657-2/>; Jim Emerson, “Scanners: Video Games: The ‘Epic Debate,’” April 18, 2006, <http://www.rogerebert.com/scanners/video-games-the-epic-debate>.

27 Mark Androvich, “Games Are Indeed Art, Says Barker,” *GamesIndustry International*, June 27, 2007, <http://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/games-are-indeed-art-says-barker>.

28 Roger Ebert, “Games vs. Art: Ebert vs. Barker,” *RogerEbert.com*, July 21, 2007, <http://www.rogerebert.com/rogers-journal/games-vs-art-ebert-vs-barker>.

29 “Feedback: Gamers and Artists,” *RogerEbert.com*, July 23, 2007, <http://rogerebert-prod-1056988946.us-east-1.elb.amazonaws.com/rogers-journal/feedback-gamers-and-artists>.

30 Chris Baker, “Roger Ebert, Game Reviewer,” *Wired*, July 30, 2007, <http://www.wired.com/gamelife/2007/07/roger-ebert-g-1/>.

Ebert's longest, most detailed, and by far most contentious statement about games and art came several years later, in a 2010 blog post provocatively titled "Video Games Can Never Be Art." This time around, Ebert was inspired by a TED Talk by independent game developer Kellee Santiago that readers had sent to him.<sup>31</sup> In the talk, Santiago briefly referenced Ebert's nay-saying (as was by then commonplace in discussions of games and art) and cited the experimental game installation *Waco Resurrection* (Eddo Stern, 2004), the popular time-bending puzzle platformer *Braid* (Number None, 2009), and her own studio's meditative *Flower* (thatgamecompany, 2009) as examples of the artistic evolution of games, looking forward to a bright future for the game industry. Ebert praised Santiago's passion but stuck firmly to his guns, writing, "I remain convinced that in principle, video games cannot be art. . . . [N]o video gamer now living will survive long enough to experience the medium as an art form."<sup>32</sup> He went on to invoke Plato and Aristotle on aesthetics and superficially critique the three games cited by Santiago on the basis of brief video clips and screenshots, concluding that they made "pathetic" arguments for games as art.

This blog post has produced nearly five thousand comments (later, Ebert said only about three hundred of those were in agreement with his position) and countless response articles, blog posts, and forum discussions.<sup>33</sup> As in previous waves of the debate, many Ebert readers expressed disappointment with what they considered an unreasonable and unnecessary slight against games. Likewise, many critics pointed out that Ebert had never played, and seemed to have no intention of ever playing, any of the games he was criticizing. Some began to suggest that Ebert was a troll, deliberately provoking gaming culture for the sake of page views and ad revenue, or simply as a cruel joke.<sup>34</sup> Alongside the earlier-mentioned titles, a handful of newer games come up repeatedly in this batch of responses to Ebert, including *Flower*, the interactive film noir *Heavy Rain* (Quantic Dream, 2010), the dystopian first-person shooter *Bioshock* (Irrational Games, 2007), and the autobiographical "artgame" *Passage* (Jason Rohrer, 2007). As I have argued elsewhere, *Bioshock* and *Passage* in particular had become important catalysts for a burgeoning critical discourse on games that sought to engage the medium as serious art.<sup>35</sup> The ad hominem insults grew more vicious, often referencing Ebert's struggle with cancer, which had by this point resulted in some facial disfigurement and the loss of his ability to speak.<sup>36</sup> The influential (and controversial) gaming web comic *Penny Arcade* was particularly crude in its rejection of

31 "An Argument for Game Artistry | Kellee Santiago | TEDxUSC," YouTube video, 15:37, posted by "TEDx Talks," August 17, 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K9y6MYDSAww&feature=youtu.be>.

32 Roger Ebert, "Video Games Can Never Be Art," *RogerEbert.com*, April 16, 2010, <http://www.rogerebert.com/rogers-journal/video-games-can-never-be-art>.

33 Roger Ebert, "Okay, Kids, Play on My Lawn," *RogerEbert.com*, July 1, 2010, <http://www.rogerebert.com/rogers-journal/okay-kids-play-on-my-lawn>.

34 See, for example, the comments on Brian Ashcraft, "An Open Letter To Roger Ebert," *Kotaku*, April 19, 2010, <http://kotaku.com/5520087/an-open-letter-to-rogerebert>.

35 Felan Parker, "An Art World for Artgames," *Loading . . . Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association* 7, no. 11 (2013): 41–60; Parker, "Canonizing Bioshock."

36 Putin, April 17, 2010, comment on Ebert, "Video Games Can Never Be Art."



Ebert's claims, relying heavily on ageist insults that reflect the rhetoric of old media versus new media employed throughout the debate.<sup>37</sup>

A few months after this outburst, Ebert published another blog post, "Okay, Kids, Play on My Lawn," in which he quite unexpectedly conceded that he really didn't know much about games and should not have made such broad pronouncements about them. "I would never express an opinion on a movie I hadn't seen. Yet I declared as an axiom that video games can never be Art. I still believe this, but I should never have said so. Some opinions are best kept to yourself."<sup>38</sup> Ebert wrote that most of the comments and retorts had been intelligent and well written, offering alternative definitions of art and suggestions on worthwhile games to try (an exceedingly generous description of the backlash he had been subjected to), but that ultimately he simply wasn't willing to explore the medium enough to properly assess it. He concludes by admitting, "I was a fool for mentioning video games in the first place."<sup>39</sup> Most of the comments on this blog post are comparatively respectful, praising Ebert for taking the high road and admitting his error.<sup>40</sup> This was seen as "a major victory" by some fans and journalists, as if Ebert had reversed his position completely and declared games a superior art form, when in fact all he had offered was a somewhat backhanded apology for stirring the pot.<sup>41</sup> This marked the end of Ebert's direct involvement in the games-as-art debate, save for some dismissive tweets, and he died in 2013.<sup>42</sup> The impact of his comments, however, is ongoing.

**Obstacles and Objections to Legitimation.** The most common popular objections and counterarguments to the idea of games as art are not only put forward by pundits outside gaming culture like Ebert; some gaming enthusiasts don't want their hobby to be "polluted" by the pretensions of art, or see games and art as equally important but fundamentally separate spheres.<sup>43</sup> Regardless of their motives, arguments against games as art tend to focus on four supposed limitations of the form: the fact that most digital games are commercial mass culture, the perceived frivolity of the pleasure and entertainment derived from games, the association of games with children and the associated moral panic about media effects, and their interactivity and nonlinearity as works. Although from an academic standpoint these arguments are unsustainable, my purpose here is not to disprove or dismantle them. Rather, this sets the stage for my subsequent analysis of arguments in favor of games as art, which must contend with these objections in various ways, whether by addressing them directly, questioning their validity, or simply ignoring them.

37 "Again with the Art Stuff," *Penny Arcade*, April 21, 2010, <http://www.penny-arcade.com/2010/4/21/>.

38 Ebert, "Okay, Kids."

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 Sam Kennedy, "Roger Ebert Concedes That Games Can Be Art," *I Up*, July 1, 2010, <http://www.1up.com/news/roger-ebert-concedes-games-art>.

42 Brian Sipple, "Roger Ebert Tweets Dismissal of 'The Last of Us,' Exchanges Words with Naughty Dog," *Game Rant*, June 22, 2012, <https://gamerant.com/ebert-the-last-of-us-naughty-dog-brian-156418/>.

43 Brian Moriarty, "Opinion: Brian Moriarty's Apology for Roger Ebert," *GameSetWatch*, March 15, 2011, [http://www.gamesetwatch.com/2011/03/opinion\\_brian\\_moriartys\\_apolog.php](http://www.gamesetwatch.com/2011/03/opinion_brian_moriartys_apolog.php).

The charge that some forms of popular culture cannot be art on the grounds that they are mass produced and sold for profit has a long history, going back to the Kantian ideal of aesthetic disinterestedness and extending to Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's Marxist critique of the culture industry, in which the consumption of mass culture commodities is a tool of oppression.<sup>44</sup> Commercial industries and for-profit enterprises are supposedly compromised by their "interestedness," driven by material-economic stakes that are seen to lack the autonomy needed to pursue the higher values of art.<sup>45</sup> Opponents of games as art frequently criticize games according to a simplistic version of the mass culture critique, suggesting that the business of commercial game production is tawdry, immature, and incapable of making meaningful art. One anonymous respondent to Ebert's 2005 post negatively compares the film industry to the game industry, arguing that the latter is much more "adverse to exploration and experimentation," and complaining that most people involved in game development are too young to have the kind of meaningful insights found in canonical art films.<sup>46</sup> Elsewhere, games are compared to pornography, on the grounds that both industries trade pleasure for money, and neither should be considered art.<sup>47</sup> Game developer Brian Moriarty, who on several occasions has iconoclastically sided with Ebert and offered apologia for his arguments, calls games "product art" and "kitsch art," the kind of market-driven low culture produced by industries rather than artists, in contrast to other, "sublime" art forms.<sup>48</sup>

Ebert's own comments frequently return to this point, with great derision. In his 2007 response to Barker, he suggests that the only way games might enter the realm of art is via an ironic postmodern subversion of their mass-cultural origins: "Would Warhol have considered Clive Barker's video game *Undying* [EA Games, 2001] as art? Certainly. He would have kept it in its shrink-wrapped box, placed it inside a Plexiglas display case, mounted it on a pedestal, and labeled it 'Video Game.'"<sup>49</sup> This mocking conception of art as whatever a pretentious artist figure puts in a gallery, familiar from countless parodies, speaks volumes about popular understandings of the art world and its institutions. (Ironically, as other scholars have shown, games and game-based art had by this point already entered the institutional gallery in a variety of ways, both subversive and celebratory, and this was evidently not sufficient to grant the medium widespread legitimacy.)<sup>50</sup> Similarly, Ebert openly mocks one of Santiago's slides, which identified seven decidedly business-focused areas for the future evolution of games as

44 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/adorno/1944/culture-industry.htm>.

45 Baumann, *Hollywood Highbrow*, 9.

46 Quoted in "Gamers Fire Flaming Posts."

47 Phil Thompson, quoted in "Art of the Game 2."

48 Moriarty, "Opinion."

49 Ebert, "Games vs. Art."

50 Andy Clarke and Grethe Mitchell, eds., *Videogames and Art* (Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2007); John Sharp, "A Curiously Short History of Game Art," in *FDG '12: Proceedings of the International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games* (Foundations of Digital Games, Raleigh, NC, 2012).

an art form: “The circles are labeled: Development, Finance, Publishing, Marketing, Education, and Executive Management. I rest my case.”<sup>51</sup> Art, according to Ebert, is a pursuit incompatible with commerce. Of course, the Hollywood films Ebert made a career out of appreciating are no less commercial, but for him, the individual creative authority ascribed to the director sets film apart from nonlinear media like games.

In spite of the acceptance of media like photography and film (at least in some cases) as art, and the extensive incorporation of technology (digital and otherwise) into art of all kinds, there remains a persistent bias against technology in popular discourses of art. According to some critics, digital games are not “natural” or “organic” in the same way that, say, painting or dance are, and as such they cannot achieve the same aesthetic heights. Jack Kroll makes this central to his 2000 *Newsweek* article, emphasizing that “it’s human beings who create art, not the polygons and Bezier curves of digital technology” (strangely ascribing authorship to game graphics) and arguing that mechanical processes cannot capture the complexity of human life.<sup>52</sup> Moriarty echoes this sentiment, writing: “When I feel the need for reflection, for insight, wisdom or consolation, I turn my computers off. These needs are the ambit of the sublime arts, which are inspired and informed by philosophy, and by faith.”<sup>53</sup> Of course, as Bourdieu demonstrates, the purported distinction between commercial or technological art and “sublime art” is tied to the historically low status of folk and mass culture, and it has as much to do with class and cultural hierarchies as it does with aesthetics.<sup>54</sup> Rather than proving that games cannot be art, all these critics are really saying is that games (and game enthusiasts) currently have low cultural status; as the history of film and other popular media suggests, this does not preclude the possibility of legitimation.

Games and play, and especially digital games, are understood by their detractors to be primarily a form of entertainment, merely a pleasurable way to pass the time, rather than an edifying or intrinsically meaningful experience. The expression “it’s just a game” is taken to be proof of this lack of inherent value. Like the arguments about commercialism and technology described earlier, the idea that games are inherently frivolous is fraught with internal contradictions (chess and most sports are not seen in these terms, after all). For Ebert, “video games represent a loss of those precious hours we have available to make ourselves more cultured, civilized and empathetic,” and several of his respondents agree, suggesting that games do not “edify and ennoble” or “endure” in the manner of great art.<sup>55</sup> The supposed lack of “serious” subject matter in games, and their association with traditionally “low” or “immature” genres such as science fiction and fantasy, reinforces this notion.<sup>56</sup> Charges of frivolity and escapism are often presented with a knowing sarcasm, exemplified by *Guardian* art critic Jonathan Jones, who mockingly asks, referring to an academic paper on games and art, “What

51 Ebert, “Video Games Can Never Be Art.”

52 Kroll, “‘Emotion Engine’? I Don’t Think So.”

53 Moriarty, “Opinion.”

54 Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 485.

55 Ebert, “Why Did the Chicken Cross the Genders?”; Barton Odorn, quoted in “Art of the Game 2”; Kathleen, July 1, 2010, comment on Ebert, “Okay, Kids.”

56 Joe Trotter, November 29, 2005, comment on “Ebert: Games Inferior to Movies.”

was a professor doing playing all these games?”—as if nothing in the world could be more preposterous.<sup>57</sup> There is a classed dimension to this discourse: taking pleasure in playing games is, according to critics like Jones, not a pastime befitting the educated elite. Beaty argues that the perceived lack of aesthetic distance in fan cultures, which are grounded in intimate involvement with and affection for their objects, makes it easier for critics to dismiss them according to traditional aesthetic frameworks, and this evidently holds true in negative critical responses to games.<sup>58</sup>

Closely tied to the entertainment argument is the long-standing association of games with children and youth (idle youth in particular), despite the fairly obvious fact that games of various kinds are an extremely common activity for adults as well. Although their origins are in university computer labs and bar amusements, digital games are often categorized as children’s toys rather than with “adult” games like sports or casino games. One detractor describes digital games as being “at the level of children’s art,” designed to produce joy and nothing more, and contrasts them against “artful masterpieces” that presumably evoke more adult reactions.<sup>59</sup> Around the time that Ebert first spoke out on games, efforts to regulate or censor games were gaining steam in the wake of controversy over a hidden sex scene discovered by fans in the code of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (Rockstar, 2004) and a growing range of literature by psychology researchers on negative “media effects.”<sup>60</sup> Although many popular gaming franchises might be dismissed as “juvenile,” digital games have paradoxically faced widespread moral panic over their purported negative effects on children in terms of cognitive development, violent behavior, morals, and physical health.<sup>61</sup> This contradiction—that games are both childish and dangerous to children—situates digital games firmly as a “bad object” and is a recurring theme in discourse against games as art.

The Belgian comics scholar Thierry Groensteen identifies a similar “handicap” for comics, which have also been historically dismissed for their association with youth and adolescence.<sup>62</sup> In many such cases, critics are not talking about actual children but rather the imagined lower-class mass audience for popular culture, an audience that is infantilized regardless of actual age.<sup>63</sup> For example, one commenter on Ebert’s blog finds it “depressing to see my grown up family members at times glued to a video game”—like the Jones quote earlier, the implication is that only childish, immature adults play games, or perhaps that games actually cause adults to revert

57 Jonathan Jones, “Sorry MoMA, Video Games Are Not Art,” *The Guardian*, November 30, 2012, <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2012/nov/30/moma-video-games-art>.

58 Beaty, *Comics versus Art*, 75.

59 Vicki Gundrum, April 17, 2010, comment on Ebert, “Video Games Can Never Be Art.”

60 Seth Schiesel, “Contesting the Not-So-Virtual World of Politics,” *New York Times*, September 10, 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/10/sports/othersports/10game.html>; Craig Anderson, “An Update on the Effects of Playing Violent Video Games,” *Journal of Adolescence* 27, no. 1 (February 2004): 113–122, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2003.10.009>.

61 John Constantine, “Are Games Art? Dissecting the Debate,” *IUp*, 2010, <http://www.1up.com/features/games-art-dissecting-debate>; McKernan, “Morality of Play,” 9, 11, 13.

62 Groensteen, cited in Beaty, *Comics versus Art*, 21.

63 *Ibid.*, 23; Newman and Levine, *Legitimizing Television*, 16.

into childishness.<sup>64</sup> Again, here, the opposition to games as art is based as much on the presumed audience for games as it is on their formal-aesthetic properties.

None of the arguments described here are unique to digital games. Although they are inflected with the historical and cultural specificities of gaming, analogues are easily found in discourse on other popular media, from television to comics, popular music, and the novel. The most contentious objection to games as art, however, is at least partially medium specific. The nonlinearity of digital games, and their “interactive” capacity for player input and agency, informs most discourse on games as art, exacerbating and reinforcing the other objections. Games are seen as meaningless commercial distractions for the juvenile masses, made even more dangerous (especially when it comes to violence) by their addictive interactivity. The fannishness of games, exemplified by the distasteful stereotype of the hypnotized, obsessive gamer, is likewise tied to their supposedly immersive interactivity, in stark contrast to the Kantian archetype of the calm, disinterested subject in aesthetic contemplation of paintings and landscapes.

Ebert makes a particularly big deal of this aspect of games, arguing that if viewers change the art, they become the artist. He considers this ambiguity antithetical to art, which he claims “seeks to lead you to an inevitable conclusion, not a smorgasbord of choices.”<sup>65</sup> He also criticizes the goal-oriented aspects of games in similar terms, suggesting that any work you can win or lose is not art.<sup>66</sup> Central to Ebert’s resistance to interactivity is his conception of authorship. Player agency or choice is “the opposite of the strategy of serious film and literature, which requires authorial control”—interactivity, it seems, is even more problematic for authorship than the conditions of commercial production, in which hundreds of people might work on a single game or movie.<sup>67</sup> Jones similarly focuses on interactivity and authorship, describing digital games as code-generated “playgrounds” (again not-so-subtly linking games with children) and declaring that in these conditions *none* of the agents involved has any creative authority. “The player cannot claim to impose a personal vision of life on the game,” Jones writes, “while the creator of the game has ceded that responsibility. No one ‘owns’ the game, so there is no artist, and therefore no work of art.”<sup>68</sup>

Evidently, the long history of interactivity in other forms of art is lost on these critics. As Bourdieu points out, unlike traditional fine art, folk and popular art forms such as theater and dance involve varying degrees of audience participation (and have been denigrated on these grounds), and various twentieth-century avant-garde movements have willfully ceded authorial control in favor of chance and interactivity.<sup>69</sup> I would argue, however, that this objection is less about interactive art in principle, and more about a perceived dissonance between linear *narrative* and interactivity. For

64 Ebert, “Okay, Kids.”

65 Ebert, “Games vs. Art.”

66 Ebert, “Video Games Can Never Be Art.”

67 Ebert, “Why Did the Chicken Cross the Genders?”

68 Jones, “Sorry MoMA.”

69 Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 487; David Getsy, ed., *From Diversion to Subversion: Games, Play, and Twentieth-Century Art* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011).

Ebert, art is about storytelling above all (the majority of his counterexamples to games as art are novels and fiction films), and storytelling in his estimation requires individual authorship, which appears to be interrupted by player agency. Abstract games such as *Tetris* (Alexey Pajitnov, 1984) do not qualify as art because they do not tell stories, while games that do tell stories are disqualified because their narratives are nonlinear. Games, like other forms of popular culture, thus represent to their critics a “bastard genre” that merges aspects of authored narrative, audiovisual representation, and technologically mediated interactivity into an impure hybrid that does not appear to fit within established paradigms of aesthetic purity and the separation between forms.<sup>70</sup>

As I have argued throughout this section, the objections raised by Ebert and others to the idea of games as art are a rehearsal of “commonsense” notions about art, derived from a variety of sources and reflecting a particular cultural-historical trajectory. Kant’s ideal of disinterestedness is awkwardly blended with Romantic notions of personal expression and emotional resonance, filtered through the cinematic model of auteurism, and positioned against both commercial mass culture and the perceived artistic excesses of twentieth-century modernism and postmodernism (as evidenced by Ebert’s snarky reference to Warhol). This set of colloquial aesthetic concerns represents a powerful rhetorical toolkit in processes of cultural legitimation, and in the following section I demonstrate that it also forms the basis of most arguments in favor of games as art.

**Legitimation Strategies.** The arguments cited above are all fundamentally flawed. Indeed, scholars in art history, philosophy, cultural studies, and psychology have dedicated much intellectual energy to untangling the complex issues that Ebert and others present as clear-cut (the literature on media effects alone is practically a subdiscipline). However, grounded as they are in widely held conceptions of art, these arguments have real power and have galvanized efforts to legitimate games as art. Negative public attention to games contributed to a general false sense of oppression among gamers, putting them on the defensive and producing a kind of crisis of legitimacy. Much of the discourse in favor of games as art is just as problematic as its opposite, made up of ad hominem insults, vague equivocations, and arbitrary personal canons. They derive not only from a strong sense that games are inherently deserving of artistic legitimacy but also from the sense that they need to be actively defended against the villainous Eberts of the world.

Game scholar Jesper Juul suggests that this crisis of legitimacy has its origins in players’ intimate aesthetic involvement with the medium: “The defense of video games (as of most things) tends to grow from personal fascination. *I* enjoy video games; *I* feel that they give me important experiences; *I* associate them with wide-ranging thoughts about life, the universe, and so on. This is valuable *to me*, and *I* want to understand and share it.”<sup>71</sup> This “legitimizing aspiration,” in Beaty’s terms, is a central part of

70 Groensteen, cited in Beaty, *Comics versus Art*, 19; Brendan Keogh, “Across Worlds and Bodies: Criticism in the Age of Video Games,” *Journal of Games Criticism*, 2014, <http://gamescriticism.org/articles/keogh-1-1/>.

71 Jesper Juul, *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 23, emphasis in original.

contemporary pop-culture fandom, seeking external recognition and acclaim as a way of validating fans' deep investment and devotion to an object.<sup>72</sup> Since the 1950s, the work of legitimating and canonizing popular cultural forms has often begun with enthusiasts (as in the cases of film and comics), and this discourse helps establish which objects and creators are eventually taken up by critics and scholars—who are usually themselves fans, using their position and institutional authority to continue the project of legitimation.<sup>73</sup> The arguments discussed in this section, regardless of source and pedigree, are permeated by fannish enthusiasm and the underlying aspiration to legitimacy.

Legitimation discourses are highly selective, constructing a particular vision of the medium by strategically citing examples that fit this vision.<sup>74</sup> The arguments discussed here tend to follow a common pattern: identify features commonly associated with art (e.g., personal expression, formal beauty), and then demonstrate how certain games fit those criteria. In a talk sponsored by the British Academy of Film and Television Arts, the cofounders of the acclaimed game studio BioWare loosely adapt a short definition of art from Leo Tolstoy: art produces emotions. They use this snappy, if limited, definition as a framework to present their own games and other games published by their parent company Electronic Arts as worthwhile works of art.<sup>75</sup> In a completely different intellectual milieu, the philosopher of art Aaron Smuts adheres to this same basic formula, evaluating a small handful of mainstream action games according to “every major theory of art” from historical to representational, in each case finding them worthy of the distinction.<sup>76</sup> This is an ideological as well as aesthetic process, and so it is key to ask which vision of games, and of art, is being put forward in a given argument, and who or what is being omitted from the proposed canon (“What about abstract puzzle games?” we might ask of BioWare and Smuts).

Showing how they respond to the objections discussed above, I outline the most common strategies used in legitimation arguments about games between 2005 and 2010: alignment with established forms, appeals to medium specificity, the identification of author figures, the notion that games are a synthesis of many art forms, and populist arguments that position games against high art.

One of the most common ways of defending digital games, as well as other popular media, is alignment with established art forms.<sup>77</sup> This is a straightforward but effective strategy that attempts to demonstrate how the seemingly unacceptable new form “is in fact acceptable because it conforms to existing, valid norms, values, or rules,” thus incorporating it into a grander narrative of art history.<sup>78</sup> In a single

72 Beaty, *Comics versus Art*, 84.

73 *Ibid.*, 74.

74 Newman and Levine, *Legitimizing Television*, 35.

75 “BioWare: Annual Video Games Lecture,” *BAFTA Guru*, November 15, 2011, <http://guru.bafta.org/bioware-annual-video-games-lecture-video>.

76 Aaron Smuts, “Are Video Games Art?,” *Contemporary Aesthetics*, 2005, <http://www.contempaesthetics.org/new-volume/pages/article.php?articleID=299>.

77 Juul, *Art of Failure*, 23.

78 Shyon Baumann, “A General Theory of Artistic Legitimation: How Art Worlds Are Like Social Movements,” *Poetics* 35, no. 1 (February 2007): 49; Beaty, *Comics versus Art*, 31.

breathless article, critic Chi Kong Lui exemplifies this strategy, positively comparing various games to Duchamp, Robert Mapplethorpe, Picasso, Toulouse-Lautrec, D. W. Griffith, German expressionism, Jean Renoir, Fellini, and several other canonical artists and movements.<sup>79</sup> Accounts of games that made the player cry, a much-maligned cliché in gaming culture, are another form of alignment that suggests the emotional impact of gaming can be comparable to other art forms.<sup>80</sup> The frequently cited *Final Fantasy VII* is held in high esteem in no small part because of a famously tear-jerking scene in which a beloved female companion character is killed by the villain.<sup>81</sup> These appeals to artistic status based on established models are structurally similar, but their meaning and effectiveness depend on the specific forms or traditions games are being aligned with.<sup>82</sup>

Alignment almost always involves distantiation as well, to “emphasize those elements [of the medium] which are most clearly artistic, while suppressing less desirable ancestors.”<sup>83</sup> Newman and Levine point out that in some cases a form can gain legitimacy only when it distances itself from its own low-cultural history, in order to take on the traits associated with a more accepted form, as when television shows and games are praised for being “cinematic.”<sup>84</sup> Consider the game critic Leigh Alexander’s argument that games must “move on” from their traditional emphasis on fun and entertainment to gain the cultural legitimacy and relevance granted to other forms, echoing some of the objections discussed earlier.<sup>85</sup> Much of the academic work on games and art also operates explicitly or implicitly in the alignment mode, attempting to construct a version of games and their history that fits within established academic and artistic paradigms.

Many alignment arguments center on film, which is unsurprising given that the most public critiques of games came from a film critic, and to a lesser extent literature (especially novels). According to tech reporter Jeremy Reimer, the best games are “comparable to literary fiction” and “on par with any ‘serious’ art film.”<sup>86</sup> The editor of Roger Ebert’s website at the time, Jim Emerson, disagreed with Ebert’s assessment and compared the hit mystery-puzzle game *Myst* (Cyan, 1993) to the atmospheric films of his favorite director, David Lynch.<sup>87</sup> One letter writer proclaims that the original *Doom* (id Software, 1993), contrary to Ebert’s derogatory comments, “was to games what *Rashomon* was to movies,” in terms of its lasting influence on the form and content

79 Chi Kong Lui, “Are Videogames Art?,” *GameCritics.com*, May 27, 2003, <http://www.gamecritics.com/are-videogames-art>.

80 Juul, *Art of Failure*, 28.

81 Clive Thompson, “Can a Game Make You Cry?,” *Wired*, November 7, 2005, <http://www.wired.com/gaming/virtualworlds/commentary/games/2005/11/69475>.

82 Beaty, *Comics versus Art*, 31.

83 Becker, *Art Worlds*, 339.

84 Newman and Levine, *Legitimizing Television*, 29.

85 Leigh Alexander, “Playing Outside,” *New Inquiry*, June 17, 2013, <http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/playing-outside/>.

86 Reimer, “Roger Ebert Says.”

87 Emerson, “Video Games.”



of the medium.<sup>88</sup> Others are even more hyperbolic—in the *Atlantic*, Kyle Chayka makes a direct comparison between the popular *Pokémon* franchise (Game Freak, 1996) and Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*.<sup>89</sup> In all these arguments, the legitimacy of other forms is taken for granted and extended to games by analogy.

Some of Ebert’s opponents concede that many games are not worthy of artistic status but argue that the medium is still in its infancy and will follow the same teleological trajectory that is retroactively applied to film and other media, eventually and inevitably becoming legitimate art.<sup>90</sup> Others argue that this artistic destiny is not guaranteed and requires great creators and works “to push this young medium from squalling infancy into graceful adulthood.”<sup>91</sup> Another perspective is that art is simply a matter of posterity, and games will only in retrospect gain the legitimacy they deserve.<sup>92</sup> There is still a clear attempt here to situate games within established artistic paradigms, but they are positioned closer to the beginning of a presumably linear process.

The most banal form of alignment argument is the “*Citizen Kane* of games” trope, referring to attempts to identify the single greatest game of all time, or the one that best exemplifies the whole medium, commensurate with the legacy of Orson Welles’s canonical 1941 film. Games as diverse as *Tetris* and the sci-fi action-adventure game *Metroid Prime* (Nintendo, 2002) have been held up as worthy of the *Kane* mantle for an equally diverse range of reasons (lasting influence on the medium, audiovisual style, narrative sophistication, emotional impact, and so on).<sup>93</sup> *Citizen Kane* is so ubiquitously referenced in popular culture that it has become a kind of simulacrum for art itself, and in particular popular art that transcends its commercial origins through authorship. The comparison has become such a cliché that it has provoked considerable ridicule from game critics and journalists and numerous ironic invocations, although it is still used sincerely often enough that the blog *The Citizen Kane of Video Games* compiles new examples for mockery regularly.<sup>94</sup>

Literature and film are obvious points of comparison for game genres that emphasize narrative and audiovisual style, but some critics argue that these comparisons play

88 Ebert, “Movie Answer Man: Critics vs. Gamers on ‘Doom.’”

89 Kyle Chayka, “Why Video Games Are Works of Art,” *The Atlantic*, May 5, 2010, <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2010/05/why-video-games-are-works-of-art/56205/>.

90 Barker, “The Game of Art 3,” quoted in Brandon Sheffield, “Clive Barker Talks Games as Art, Jericho,” *Gamasutra*, June 27, 2007, [http://www.gamasutra.com/php-bin/news\\_index.php?story=14478](http://www.gamasutra.com/php-bin/news_index.php?story=14478); “Feedback”; Michael Mirasol, “Far Flungers: Why Video Games Are Indeed Art,” *RogerEbert.com*, April 2, 2011, <http://www.rogerebert.com/far-flung-correspondents/why-video-games-are-indeed-art>.

91 N’Gai Croal, “N’Gai Croal vs. Roger Ebert vs. Clive Barker on Whether Videogames Can Be (High) Art: Round 1—Fight!,” *Newsweek*, July 30, 2007, <http://web.archive.org/web/20100414155856/http://blog.newsweek.com/blogs/levelup/archive/2007/07/30/croal-vs-ebert-vs-barker-on-whether-videogames-can-be-high-art-round-1.aspx>.

92 Cyber Rat, April 19, 2010, comment on Ashcraft, “An Open Letter to Roger Ebert”; Faceless Master, April 17, 2010, comment on Jexhisu, “Not This Again : Ebert : Video Games Can Never Be Art,” *NeoGAF*, April 17, 2010, <http://www.neogaf.com/forum/showthread.php?t=393040>.

93 jaimé kuroiwa, April 16, 2008, comment on Leigh Alexander, “Opinion: Why Raising ‘Kane’ Won’t Help Games’ Legitimacy,” April 16, 2009, [http://www.gamasutra.com/php-bin/news\\_index.php?story=23182](http://www.gamasutra.com/php-bin/news_index.php?story=23182); Michael McWhorter, “Is *Metroid Prime* the *Citizen Kane* of Video Games?,” *Kotaku*, October 6, 2009, <http://kotaku.com/5375775/is-metroid-prime-the-citizen-kane-of-video-games>.

94 Alexander, “Opinion: Why Raising ‘Kane’ Won’t Help”; *The Citizen Kane of Video Games* (blog), accessed September 14, 2016, <http://thecitizenkaneofvideogames.tumblr.com/>.

into Ebert's hands, devaluing games by imposing inappropriate criteria.<sup>95</sup> Journalist and critic N'Gai Croal points to a variety of artistic traditions, such as improvised performance and oral storytelling, which might be better suited to the discussion of games as art. "Rather than insist on exploring aspects of other art forms that videogames don't resemble," Croal asks, "why not look for those that do?"<sup>96</sup> Similarly, critic Kieron Gillen expresses frustration that games are not compared to dance and architecture, "which are equally accepted as art forms and don't operate anything like the silver screen or the printed word."<sup>97</sup> In rejecting the comparison to film and literature in favor of other forms, these critics deliberately set themselves apart from less cultured fans whose artistic horizons end with *Citizen Kane*. More important, however, these art forms and others like them, such as installation and new media art, effectively counter the charge that interactivity precludes artistic status.<sup>98</sup> By pointing out that there are already accepted forms of art that involve audience agency and participation, gaming advocates can deny the validity of the interactivity objection (rather than reifying it by emphasizing narrative or authorial control).

Not all legitimation efforts involve alignment with established forms and conventions. As Juul notes, the downside of aligning games with other media is that it can make them seem derivative or superfluous, potentially weakening their claim to artistic status.<sup>99</sup> Indeed, one of Ebert's standard retorts is that regardless of whether games are able to do the same things film can do, film does them better.<sup>100</sup> Other approaches therefore involve carefully differentiating the unaccepted new medium from existing artistic paradigms and proposing more or less radical changes to those paradigms that will accommodate a broader range of art forms.<sup>101</sup> According to this logic, games transcend established categories, and the concept of art should be molded to fit them, rather than the other way around. In particular, the idea of medium specificity is used to respond to and counter Ebert's arguments about interactivity.

A parallel can be drawn here between early film theory and early writing on digital games, both of which attempt to account for a new form as art. Film theorists sought to identify an essential, "medium-specific" quality in cinema that could not be found in other art forms. Medium-specificity arguments are based on the assumption that art forms differ in terms of what they do best, depending on their formal and material properties, and attempt to extrapolate from the most suitable structure, content, or stylistic techniques for an art form based on these properties.<sup>102</sup> This kind of formalism serves a pragmatic function, drawing attention to and encouraging particular kinds of

95 Juul, *Art of Failure*, 23.

96 Croal, "N'Gai Croal."

97 Gillen, quoted in "Gamers Fire Flaming Posts."

98 Mike Haseloff, "Video Games Can Always Be Art," *1Up*, April 21, 2010, <http://www.1up.com/do/blogEntry?bid=9027874>.

99 Juul, *Art of Failure*, 23.

100 Ebert, "Video Games Can Never Be Art."

101 Juul, *Art of Failure*, 24.

102 Noël Carroll, *Philosophical Problems of Classical Film Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 12, 15.

aesthetic strategies that are deemed to be valuable in a given context and discouraging others. Certain early game scholars and critics, dubbed the “ludologists,” took a similar approach, identifying interactive rule-based systems as the medium-specific essence of games and rejecting the idea that games could be a storytelling medium, along with concordant attempts to make sense of them using literary methods.<sup>103</sup> Game developer Rod Humble adopts this perspective in his 2006 account of games as art, writing that “a game needs nothing else apart from its rules to succeed as a work of art” and suggesting that any attempt to dismiss games that does not consider their essential rule-basedness is missing the point.<sup>104</sup>

In the responses to Ebert’s critiques, many fans cry foul on his comparisons to film and literature, arguing that it isn’t “fair” to compare games to fundamentally different media rather than evaluating them on their own terms and embracing their special qualities of interactivity and nonlinearity.<sup>105</sup> According to these arguments, film and games are “apples and oranges,” and game designers who try to emulate movies are misguided.<sup>106</sup> Some commenters argue that judging a game by its story is shallow and superficial, like judging a movie on the basis of its special effects or the beauty of its actors, while others simply argue that games tell stories that could not exist in any other form.<sup>107</sup> Journalist and critic Anthony Burch dismisses Ebert’s cultural hierarchies, arguing that “to claim that pre-baked [noninteractive] experiences are inherently more meaningful than player-created ones is nonsense,” and calling for a more egalitarian system of aesthetic judgment that includes both and appreciates their differences.<sup>108</sup>

In the Ebert debate, the medium specificity of games is often articulated by triumphantly pointing out things that movies are *not* able to do: they lack the audience agency, “real” emotional investment, and cooperative experiences that games can produce.<sup>109</sup> According to this argument, games such as the critically acclaimed multiversal fantasy role-playing game *Planescape: Torment* (Black Isle, 1999) are able to exploit games’ specificity to tell stories that “could never have been told as a movie or a novel or a poem.”<sup>110</sup> Rather than being an obstacle, the interactive and nonlinear qualities that are seen to distinguish games from other art forms are reframed as the very source of their aesthetic value and artistic legitimacy.<sup>111</sup> Locating the medium

103 For an extreme example, see Markku Eskelinen, “The Gaming Situation,” *Game Studies* 1, no. 1 (2001), <http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/eskelinen/>.

104 Rod Humble, “Game Rules as Art,” *Escapist*, April 18, 2006, [http://www.escapistmagazine.com/articles/view/issues/issue\\_41/247-Game-Rules-as-Art](http://www.escapistmagazine.com/articles/view/issues/issue_41/247-Game-Rules-as-Art).

105 GomezGomita, April 22, 2010, comment on Haseloff, “Gaming 101up”; John Beeler, January 10, 2006, comment on Simon Carless, “The Auteur Problem, in Full Effect,” *GameSetWatch*, January 11, 2006, [http://www.gamesetwatch.com/2006/01/the\\_auteur\\_problem\\_in\\_full\\_eff.php](http://www.gamesetwatch.com/2006/01/the_auteur_problem_in_full_eff.php).

106 Janine, November 29, 2005, comment on “Ebert: Games Inferior to Movies”; Sakey, “War of Art.”

107 Isley Unruh, quoted in “The Game of Art 3”; Brendan, April 17, 2010, comment on Ebert, “Video Games Can Never Be Art”; Croal, “N’Gai Croal.”

108 Anthony Burch, “Yet Another ‘Video Games as Art’ Essay—Destructoid,” *Destructoid*, October 30, 2006, <http://www.destructoid.com/yet-another-video-games-as-art-essay-25035.phtml>.

109 Saul Ortiz and Simon van Alphan, quoted in “Gamers Fire Flaming Posts.”

110 Graham T., quoted in “The Game of Art 3.”

111 Glen Isip, February 13, 2008, comment on Preston, “Arty Party,” [http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/3536/the\\_arty\\_party.php](http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/3536/the_arty_party.php); Constantine, “Are Games Art?”

specificity of games in their interactivity is framed as a provocation to expand the very idea of art, supposedly opening up “a whole new dimension” of creative expression.<sup>112</sup> This positions games not only as aesthetically worthy but also as an evolutionary leap beyond what has come before. Games are thus the art of the future, a notion taken up by various critics and designers who predict that they will be the most important art form of the twenty-first century.<sup>113</sup> Even so, the structure of this argument is clearly adopted from critical discourse on older forms, especially film, and reflects a broader concern for medium specificity (and novelty) in dominant conceptions of art.

Media scholar Jonathan Gray observes, with tongue planted firmly in cheek, that Roland Barthes’s “plot to kill the author” has failed: despite the supposed death of the author in the humanities, authorship still matters a great deal and continues to be a primary mode of engagement with cultural texts, both in and outside of the academy.<sup>114</sup> Far from being a transcendental force, however, authorship is meaningless until mobilized in a specific social-material context and serves a variety of pragmatic functions for those who mobilize it.<sup>115</sup> Most historical attempts to legitimate popular media have involved the nomination of author figures, with fan cultures endlessly producing and debating pantheons of great artists, in hopes that “the success of the best and brightest will pave the way for the recognition of the form as a whole.”<sup>116</sup> In a model established by the rise of essayistic film criticism and film studies, authorship serves in part to justify enthusiast and intellectual interest in commercial and popular cultural forms that are otherwise seen as illegitimate by conforming to notions of the heroic auteur whose genius transcends the mundane production context.<sup>117</sup> This form of recognition and respectability usually involves masculinization as well and has historically rested on “an overt assertion of masculine prerogatives, and the disavowal of the mass cultural, the domestic, and, importantly, the feminine.”<sup>118</sup> The gendered dimension of authorship is particularly pronounced in the case of digital gaming, which was already strongly gendered as a masculine sphere.

Game designers are generally elevated above the other roles involved in game development (e.g., programmers, visual and audio artists, writers), and in some cases are highly visible auteur figures across a variety of paratexts, including packaging, marketing, and promotion. These iconic developers are often self-identified as artists and are thus easy points of reference for those attempting to counter Ebert’s

112 Ben “Yahtzee” Croshaw, “Videogames as Art,” *Escapist*, April 27, 2010, <http://www.escapistmagazine.com/articles/view/columns/extra-punctuation/7473-Videogames-as-Art>; Frank Lantz, “Doorknobs and Butterflies: Games after Art” (Art History of Games Symposium, High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA, 2010).

113 For example, Eric Zimmerman, “Manifesto: The 21st Century Will Be Defined by Games,” *Kotaku*, September 9, 2013, <http://kotaku.com/manifesto-the-21st-century-will-be-defined-by-games-1275355204>.

114 Jonathan Gray, “When Is the Author?,” in *A Companion to Media Authorship*, ed. Jonathan Gray and Derek Johnson (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 88, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/9781118505526.ch5/summary>.

115 *Ibid.*, 89, 91; Michel Foucault, “What Is an Author?,” in *The Book History Reader*, ed. David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2006), 281–291.

116 Beaty, *Comics versus Art*, 99.

117 Baumann, *Hollywood Highbrow*, 84; Newman and Levine, *Legitimizing Television*, 38.

118 Beaty, *Comics versus Art*, 73.

assertions. The same handful of names, including Nintendo's Shigeru Miyamoto, Will Wright (*SimCity* [Maxis, 1989]; *The Sims* [Maxis, 2000]), Peter Molyneux (*Black & White* [Lionhead Studios, 2001]; *Fable* [Lionhead Studios, 2004]) and others, appear repeatedly in the popular debate.<sup>119</sup> Each of these developers is identified with a distinct vision or sensibility that sets his work apart from other games, and gamers are quick to align them with great artists in other forms. According to Matt Sakey, they are gaming culture's "Fassbinders and Scorseses," serious creators who happen to have chosen games as their medium and whose genius, like that of great film directors, transcends the limitations of the commercial industry.<sup>120</sup> Around 2007, a new wave of independent game developers operating outside of the mainstream industry, such as Jason Rohrer (*Passage*) and Jonathan Blow (*Braid*), also came to exemplify the possibilities of game authorship.<sup>121</sup>

In addition to countering charges of commercialism and immaturity, auteur figures are also used to counter Ebert's primary argument that interactivity weakens authorial control in games, preventing them from being true art. There are two approaches to this objection. Some critics adopt the strategy of denying that games are truly interactive, thus reinforcing the notion that authorial control is central to true art. In spite of the unique modes of engagement in games, the author creates "everything that there is to be beheld" and predicts every possible pathway through the game.<sup>122</sup> Others instead attempt to reframe interactivity as aesthetically valid (often in terms of medium specificity), redefining authorship for games as the design of rule systems and fictional worlds that enable the player's free agency in interesting ways rather than imposing total control.<sup>123</sup> Along these lines, game scholar Noah Wardrip-Fruin suggests that games are made up of "author-crafted processes" that represent a medium-specific form of authorial expression he calls "expressive processing."<sup>124</sup> Authorship is thus invoked in a variety of ways to support different ideas of games as art, all contained within established notions of the individual author as primary creative agent.

Many people arguing for games as art emphasize the artistry and creativity that goes into producing the many discrete parts that make up a game, especially audiovisual assets like character models, music, and environments. This approach, however, is limited, given that Ebert acknowledges the potential for audiovisual beauty in games but argues that other media like film and painting easily surpass games on this front. A less common argument for games as art suggests that games are not only equal in status and value to other art forms but in fact represent the perfect synthesis of *all* art forms. Among the art forms subsumed under games in these arguments are visual art,

119 Josh Korr, "Video Games as Art, Part I: The Auteur Problem," *Korr Values* (blog), January 10, 2006, <http://korrvalues.com/portfolio/hard-korr-gamer-the-archive/january-2006/video-games-as-art-part-i-the-auteur-problem/>; Sakey, "War of Art"; Chayka, "Why Video Games Are Works of Art."

120 Baumann, *Hollywood Highbrow*, 177.

121 Parker, "Art World for Artgames."

122 Sean Weitner, quoted in "Art of the Game 2"; "Ebert: Games Inferior to Movies."

123 Chayka, "Why Video Games Are Works of Art."

124 Noah Wardrip-Fruin, *Expressive Processing: Digital Fictions, Computer Games, and Software Studies* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 3-4.

sculpture, film, music, and literature, with the added feature of interactivity to complete the “perfect union.”<sup>125</sup> In her TED Talk, Kellee Santiago boldly predicts that games will become “bigger and better” than radio, film, and television combined, the apotheosis of art.<sup>126</sup>

This strategy of legitimation has precedents in the Wagnerian ideal of opera as *Gesamtkunstwerk* (“total work of art”) and some early theories of film that saw the new medium as a glorious hybrid of everything that came before.<sup>127</sup> The Russian filmmaker and theorist Sergei Eisenstein made similar arguments about film. According to Noël Carroll, Eisenstein understood montage (the juxtaposition of elements to produce new meanings) to be the dialectical essence of all art and culture, and saw cinema as the exemplary medium of montage and the logical end point of a long historical process. Montage for Eisenstein was not unique to film but represented “the most articulate and pronounced specification of the montage principle that governs all the arts.”<sup>128</sup> A colloquial analogue to this theory can be found in arguments that identify storytelling and emotional impact as the essential features of art and position digital games as “inherently superior to more limited forms of exposition,” an exemplary medium that improves on its “static” predecessors by making stories more dynamic and interactive.<sup>129</sup> For some commentators, games do more than exemplify: they transcend art entirely and are deserving of a distinct status above and beyond traditional cultural categories.<sup>130</sup> In this discourse the emergence of digital games is nothing less than epochal in spite of the fact that similar exemplification arguments have been used to legitimate several other cultural forms in the past.

A very different way of addressing the barriers to legitimacy is to ignore the canons of art history and high culture entirely and instead situate games within the history and aesthetics of folk, popular, and mass art. In one of the first academic arguments for digital games as an art form, influential media theorist Henry Jenkins responds directly to Ebert’s objections by applying Gilbert Seldes’s notion of the “lively arts” to digital games. Writing in the 1920s, an era when the intellectual elite looked down on popular culture for its crass commercialism and technological modes of production, Seldes argued that popular arts such as cinema, jazz, and comic strips were more democratic and authentic than “bogus” high and middlebrow art forms like painting and opera.<sup>131</sup> These lively arts were deeply embedded in everyday life, and Seldes believed they were uniquely able to capture the vitality of contemporary urban

125 Burch, “Yet Another ‘Video Games as Art’ Essay”; Dan Crislip, “Video Games ARE Art: The Media Is Wrong,” *RPGamer*, 2000, <http://www.rpgamer.com/editor/2000/q1/030500dc.html>.

126 “Argument for Game Artistry.”

127 Scott D. Paulin, “Richard Wagner and the Fantasy of Cinematic Unity: The Idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* in the History and Theory of Film and Music,” in *Music and Cinema*, ed. James Buhler, Caryl Flinn, and David Neumeier (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2000), 59.

128 Noël Carroll, “Eisenstein’s Philosophy of Film,” in *Camera Obscura, Camera Lucida: Essays in Honor of Annette Michelson* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2003), 135.

129 Sakey, “War of Art”; “Ebert: Games Inferior to Movies”; Chayka, “Why Video Games Are Works of Art.”

130 D.A., April 17, 2010, comment on Ebert, “Video Games Can Never Be Art.”

131 Gilbert Seldes, *The 7 Lively Arts* (New York: Dover Publications, 2001).

experience.<sup>132</sup> For Seldes and Jenkins, the features of popular art that are denigrated by high culture (entertainment, spectacle, interactivity, and so on) are their greatest strengths, and it is high art that is lacking. Most narratives of games as art do not really challenge the high-low cultural binary, and instead reinforce it by arguing that some or all games deserve high-art status, but populist arguments attempt to move beyond this hierarchy.<sup>133</sup>

Jenkins suggests that digital games have the potential to be the exemplary art form of the current digital age in which computers are so central to everyday life. Jenkins sees the institutional art world, and by extension attempts to sublimate games into it, as “arid and stuffy . . . lifeless and pretentious” compared to the creative energy found in mainstream commercial games.<sup>134</sup> While noting that the fun, active, and often silly experiences produced by digital games seem at odds with stereotypical notions of art, Jenkins and a handful of other critics argue that these experiences should be made central to the artistic value and status of games, rather than treated as something to be apologized for or purged.<sup>135</sup> Like Seldes’s lively arts, they should challenge the stultified, disinterested conception of art with their vitality.

Populist arguments are grounded in the idea that popular art produces vital aesthetic experiences that defy traditional conceptions of art. Game designer and critic Frank Lantz expresses this idea with much enthusiasm, arguing that the “wildness” of games and their dangerous “indomitability” should be central to the art of games, and that this represents an important challenge to conventional aesthetics.<sup>136</sup> For Jenkins, there is a political dimension to this project: ascribing aesthetic value and legitimacy to digital games as popular art is a challenge to dominant cultural, social, economic, and political hierarchies.<sup>137</sup> In rejecting traditional art in favor of popular culture, this legitimization strategy circumvents many of the potential problems and barriers faced by other arguments that attempt to fit games into established categories, and furthermore it redeems the historically low status of games, making it the very source of their aesthetic value and cultural legitimacy.<sup>138</sup> Cultural and aesthetic hierarchies are inverted, and games are elevated as an exemplary form of popular art and juxtaposed to the limiting imagination of traditional art.

**Conclusion.** The Ebert affair, and a whole constellation of related events and debates occurring around 2005–2010, produced a crisis of legitimacy for games, which is still unfolding in a wide variety of contexts. Despite the common notion that struggles for artistic recognition and legitimacy are “outdated and superfluous” in the wake of the twentieth century’s supposed leveling of the cultural playing field, sociologist

132 Henry Jenkins, “Games, the New Lively Art,” 2005, <http://web.mit.edu/cms/People/henry3/GamesNewLively.html>.

133 McKernan, “Morality of Play,” 3.

134 Jenkins, “Games, the New Lively Art.”

135 Ibid.; Croal, “N’Gai Croal.”

136 Lantz, “Doorknobs and Butterflies.”

137 Jenkins, “Games, the New Lively Art.”

138 Beaty, *Comics versus Art*, 47.

Shyon Baumann argues that “the distinction between art and non-art is still with us, and it is still a powerful distinction. We have become more catholic in our ideas of what constitutes art, but we have not lost our sense of the potency and authority of art.”<sup>139</sup> This persistent power and authority is clearly reflected in the arguments surveyed here, however flawed and misguided they may be. As tempting as it is to dismiss the whole thing as petty nonsense (and having conducted extensive research on this topic, I am deeply sympathetic to this impulse), the debate precipitated by Ebert’s offhanded remarks is a key historical moment that helped establish the terms and stakes of cultural and aesthetic legitimacy for digital games and continues to shape the ways in which games are engaged and judged in popular discourse.

What is taken for granted in colloquial discussions of games and art? On all sides of this frustrating, cyclical debate, participants are motivated by deeply held beliefs about art and the rhetorical strategies employed on both sides of the games-as-art debate collectively reflect a set of dominant aesthetic concerns. This tacit aesthetic consensus and the socially accepted language used to describe it is mobilized in different ways, by different people for different reasons, but is rooted in a specific cultural history. Game critic Jim Preston aptly describes “the dominant aesthetic posture of contemporary American society” as “a kind of mainstream Romanticism provided by Rock ‘n Roll,” a colloquial derivation of the historically contingent aesthetic regime that according to historians and theorists of art only prevailed relatively recently, in the wake of the Enlightenment.<sup>140</sup> This popular idea of art is about personal expression, distinctive style, and emotional impact. However outmoded or banal by the standards of academics and the contemporary art world, these everyday notions persist in shaping aesthetic frameworks, and given the extent to which this paradigm has permeated contemporary cultural discourse, it is difficult to imagine a truly alternative or oppositional aesthetic without unintentionally reifying the same binaries and hierarchies.<sup>141</sup>

After his apology post in 2010, true to his word, Ebert steered clear of gaming culture, but he remains an inescapable presence in popular discourse on games and art. His death in 2013 inspired a wave of further commentary and discussion but with considerably less vitriol; there were more insults and some celebratory grave dancing, but most commentators expressed sadness and respect. Ebert was eulogized on numerous gaming websites and held up as a worthy, even *necessary* opponent, however wrongheaded. Journalist Chay Close, among others, praised the film critic for having an unintentional positive influence on gaming culture in the long term: “Our focus moved away from meaningless definitions and finger-pointing and toward the possibility that Ebert was right. We were considering his questions as legitimate arguments and phrasing our responses with a clarity previously reserved for little but congratulatory navel-gazing.”<sup>142</sup> This is an extraordinarily generous account. A

139 Boris Groys, *Art Power* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 15; Baumann, *Hollywood Highbrow*, 51.

140 Preston, “Arty Party”; Larry Shiner, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 3.

141 Beaty, *Comics versus Art*, 7.

142 Chay Close, “Roger Ebert’s Gift to Gaming,” *VentureBeat*, April 9, 2013, <http://venturebeat.com/2013/04/09/roger-eberts-gift-to-gaming/>.



more cynical interpretation would be that Ebert's sensational arguments and limited aesthetic framework drastically narrowed the possibility space for popular discourse on games and art and that it is still recovering. Moreover, the false sense of oppression Ebert's comments provoked in gaming enthusiasts and the crude vitriol heaped on him in "defense" of games prefigure the increasingly aggressive territorialism of "hard-core gamers" in recent years and the ongoing harassment of numerous prominent women, people of color, and queers involved in games.<sup>143</sup>

Without an iconic film critic playing the role of the villain, the ongoing struggles for legitimacy in gaming culture might look very different. Even today, Ebert is still incessantly cited in popular, critical, and academic writing about games and art, and angry rebuttals from impassioned gaming enthusiasts still appear regularly in the comment threads on his now-defunct personal blog. It's almost as if he never left. \*

*This research was supported by the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.*

143 Mia Consalvo, "Confronting Toxic Gamer Culture: A Challenge for Feminist Game Studies Scholars," *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, no. 2 (2013), <http://adanewmedia.org/2012/11/issue1-consalvo/>; Katherine Cross, "'We Will Force Gaming to Be Free': On GamerGate and the License to Inflict Suffering," *First Person Scholar*, 2014, <http://www.firstpersonscholar.com/we-will-force-gaming-to-be-free/>.