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An Apology for Roger Ebert (2011)

Delivered 4 March 2011 at the 25th Game Developer's Conference in San Francisco, and again on 24 March 2011 at Worcester Polytech.

The text was also published on 14 March 2011 by Gamasutra.

I have since added a few notes and afterthoughts. These are set apart inside tidy gray boxes, like this one.

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The title of this lecture, "An Apology for Roger Ebert," may require a bit of clarification.

I'm not here to offer an apology in the sense of regret for anything done wrong.

This is an apology in the sense of a Greek ἀπολογία, the systematic defense of a position or opinion.

> Roger Ebert

It's a defense of Roger Ebert, the Pulitzer Prize winning film critic for the *Chicago Sun-Times* who, a little over five years ago, annoyed our industry by declaring that "video games can never be art."

For those few of you unacquainted with this controversy, I'll spend just a few minutes recounting what happened.

It all started with a bad movie.

On October 21st, 2005, Universal released its adaptation of the first-person shooter game *Doom*.

I didn't see *Doom,* but Roger Ebert did. He awarded the film one star.

In his review, he wrote, "Toward the end of the movie, there is a lengthy point-of-view shot looking forward over the barrel of a large weapon ... Monsters jump out from behind things and are blasted to death, in a sequence that abandons all attempts at character and dialogue and uncannily resembles a video game."

A few days later, a reader from Missouri responded on Ebert's blog.

He wrote that "*Doom* ... the movie is *Doom* the game brought to the screen without messing around too much with the original. *Doom* works as a tribute because it fails so utterly as a movie."

Ebert's reply was terse. "There are ... sites on the Web

devoted to video games, and they review movies on their terms. I review them on mine."

Unfortunately, Ebert couldn't resist adding one more zinger: "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."

The response from gamers was prompt. Hundreds of indignant blog comments poured in from everywhere.

At first, Ebert seemed willing to discuss his opinion. When a reader from Denver asked, "Are you implying that books and film are better mediums, or just better uses of your time?" Ebert responded, "I believe books and films are better mediums, and better uses of my time. But how can I say that when I admit I am unfamiliar with video games? Because I have recently seen classic films by Fassbinder, Ozu, Herzog, Scorsese and Kurosawa, and have recently read novels by Dickens, Cormac McCarthy, Bellow, Nabokov and Hugo, and if there were video games in the same league, someone somewhere who was familiar with the best work in all three mediums would have made a convincing argument in their defense."

The comments increased in volume and temperature.

On November 27, a reader wrote, "I was saddened to read that you consider video games an inherently inferior medium ... Was not film itself once a new field of art? Did it not also take decades for its ... respectability to be

recognized?"

Ebert responded, "Yours is the most civil of countless messages I have received after writing that I did indeed consider video games inherently inferior to film and literature. There is a structural reason for that: Video games by their nature require player choices, which is the opposite of the strategy of serious film and literature, which requires authorial control."

He continued, "I am prepared to believe that video games can be elegant, subtle, sophisticated, challenging and visually wonderful. But I believe the nature of the medium prevents it from moving beyond craftsmanship to the stature of art. To my knowledge, no one in or out of the field has ever been able to cite a game worthy of comparison with the great dramatists, poets, filmmakers, novelists and composers. That a game can aspire to artistic importance as a visual experience, I accept. But for most gamers, video games represent a loss of those precious hours we have available to make ourselves more cultured, civilized and empathetic."

After this, aside from an occasional snark, Ebert appeared to have written everything he cared to on the subject.

To many of you, this issue probably seems like a thoroughly dead horse.

I thought it was dead, too. Not because anything was ever actually decided, but because after nearly five years of

table-pounding, everyone seemed tired of arguing about it.

But a few weeks after GDC ended last March, the flamewar erupted again.

The fuse was a TEDx lecture by Kellee Santiago, co-founder and president of thatgamecompany. Her lecture was titled "Stop the Debate: Video Games are Art, So What's Next?"

She cited three games, *Waco Resurrection, Braid* and her own company's *Flower,* as examples of games that she believes already qualify as art.

A video of her lecture appeared on YouTube. Some troublemaker recommended it to Roger Ebert.

On April 16th, Ebert posted a critique of Santiago's lecture under the blunt headline, "Video games can never be art."

He dismissed *Waco Resurrection, Braid* and *Flower* as "pathetic," and sternly predicted that "no video gamer now living will survive long enough to experience the medium as an art form."

Thousands of comments followed, nearly all of them in fierce protest.

Finally, on the first of July, just before the call for submissions to this conference was announced, Ebert posted what again seemed to be his final word.

Under the title “Okay, kids, play on my lawn,” Ebert wrote, “I declared as an axiom that video games can never be Art. I still believe this, but I should never have said so.”

He went on to admit that his arguments might be more convincing if he actually bothered to play some games.

He also seemed to backpedal a bit. “What I was saying is that video games could not in principle be Art. That was a foolish position to take, particularly as it seemed to apply to the entire unseen future of games … It is quite possible a game could someday be great Art.”

His weary conclusion? “I have books and movies to see. I was a fool for mentioning video games in the first place.”

Having heard all this, you may be wondering, what is there left to defend?

Ebert caved. He admitted games could be art *eventually,* didn’t he? Given enough time, anything not impossible is inevitable, right?

Maybe. But that’s not the part of Ebert’s argument I’m here to defend.

I’m here because of this sentence: “No one in or out of the field has ever been able to cite a game worthy of comparison with the great dramatists, poets, filmmakers, novelists and composers.”

Kellee Santiago conceded this point in the first sixty

seconds of her TEDx lecture.

And, as Ebert never tired of pointing out, not one of the thousands of comments he received seriously attempted any such comparison.

Now, although I'm not as experienced as Roger Ebert (*experienced* being a polite euphemism for *elderly*), I'm no spring chicken, either.

My formal education was in English. I've read many of the great books in our language, and other languages in translation. I've also watched a number of great movies, seen a number of great paintings and sculptures, and heard a lot of fine music, though never as much as I would like.

I've also been in the video game industry for nearly thirty years. Unlike Mr. Ebert, I *have* played many of the games widely regarded as great and seminal. I have the privilege of knowing many of the authors personally.

But as much as I admire games like *M.U.L.E., Balance of Power, Sim City* and *Civilization,* it would never even *occur* to me to compare them to the treasures of world literature, painting or music.

And I'm pretty sure the authors of these particular games wouldn't presume to, either.

Why are some people in this industry so anxious to wrap

themselves in the mantle of great art?

It occurred to me that an art museum might be a good place to think about this.

As it happens, there's a really good art museum just a few blocks east of Worcester Polytech, where I teach game design.

So, late one morning, I found myself in the galleries of WAM, the Worcester Art Museum, wandering among the Monets and Manets, Mattisses and Magrittes.

One canvas in particular caught my eye.

The Chess Players. Northcote, c. 1830

It was painted around 1830 by James Northcote, a member of the British Royal Academy of Arts.

Northcote was amazingly prolific. Over 2,000 works are attributed to him.

He painted historic and current news events, scenes from the Bible and classic literature, together with hundreds of portraits.

It was his animal paintings that attracted the most attention, though. Northcote made a fortune with his dramatic depictions of jungle cats, elephants, dogs and birds.

A rival artist, Henry Fuseli, is said to have remarked, “Northcote, you are an angel at an ass, but an ass at an angel.”

This Northcote in the collection of the Worcester Art Museum is not, for the most part, about animals.

The Chess Players shows a pair of gentlemen pondering over an endgame. There’s a boy standing behind one of the players, and a little dog sitting in the corner.

If you study the painting for a while, you’ll notice a couple of interesting details.

For one thing, the chess players clearly are not the center of attention. They’re dressed in dark, sober colors, receding into the space of the painting.

By contrast, the boy appears in blazing gold. It almost looks as if he’s under a spotlight.

Yet he shows no interest in the chess game. His attention is directed *away* from the world of the painting. In fact, he appears to be staring directly at you, the viewer.

In his left hand is a sheet of paper, covered with undecipherable characters.

His right finger appears to be pointing at something. But what? The sheet of paper? The man beside him?

And what is that dog doing there?

We'll probably never know. Everyone connected with the creation of this painting has been dead for generations.

I spent a long time sitting on the bench in front of Northcote's *Chess Players*.

The elements of this painting came to symbolize for me the predicament I faced by choosing to defend Roger Ebert at the biggest game conference in the world.

The two chess players are like the game industry, self-absorbed, satisfied, confident that they will soon earn a place among the fine arts, if they haven't already.

And the golden boy is Art itself, silently watching us, pointing at a secret he longs to share.

In preparing this lecture, I plowed through a 700-page anthology on Western art philosophy, including the writings of Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Augustine, Ficino, Kant, Schelling, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Shaftesbury, Croce, Nietzsche, Dewey and Heidegger.

I also read a deadly serious book on 20th century art definitions, including the writings of Weitz, Dickie and Danto.

Nowhere in 25 centuries of philosophy did I find a single author who regarded games or sports as a form of art.

When they're mentioned at all, they're dismissed as a

pastime. Harmless at best, an evil destroyer of youth at worst.

Now, it's true that a number of art museums include antique toys and games in their exhibits. Some of them, soon including the Smithsonian, even display antique video games!

It's also true that games, usually dice or cards, have often been the subject or theme of great art. I found a web site with over 220 paintings of people playing *Chess*, and it doesn't even include this work by Northcote.

It's also true that certain 20th century art movements, including Dada, Fluxus and New Games, incorporated rules and play into some of their works. These are remembered chiefly by art historians and academics, except for Fluxus, which is famous because one of its members married a Beatle.

I took flak for this comment from a few people, who objected to it as flippant and disrespectful of the Dada, Fluxus and New Games movements. Every one of these complaints came from an art historian and/or academic.

And you'll occasionally come across a philosopher or artist who admires the playful aspect of games, or the elegance of a *Chess* problem.

> Euler's identity, *élégance nonpareil*.

Some people admire the elegance of math equations, too, but nobody confuses mathematics with great art. They're different categories of human activity.

And that's how philosophy has traditionally regarded Art and Games: Categorically different.

Suggesting that a game could be great art is radical.

On the other hand, the idea of "great art" is itself somewhat radical. It dates back only about 500 years.

Before that, art was essentially practical. You valued the thing an artwork represented, not the artwork itself.

Since that time, the definition of art has undergone a continuous evolution as new ideas and technologies appeared.

This process has never been never rapid or easy. It took many decades for photography and cinema to earn their places among the Hegelian fine arts of painting, sculpture, poetry and drama, music, dance and architecture.

Now, it's natural and tempting for us to expect that games will follow the same pattern.

But there's a big difference. Photography and cinema were *new* technologies.

Games are not new. They've been part of our culture for thousands of years. They're much older than the belles

arts of the Renaissance, older than the representational art of the Greeks, older than the cave art of prehistory.

By what right do games *suddenly* demand the status of great art?

If *Chess* and *Go,* arguably the two greatest games in history, have never been regarded as works of art, why should *Missile Command?*

Are digital games somehow privileged, somehow more *artistic* than analog games?

Or does the fact that video games are now almost as big as dog food somehow entitle them to a free museum pass?

Before we can proceed any further, we need to pause and address the basic semantic problem. (You knew this was coming.)

All of us, even Roger Ebert, can say what a video game is. Can any of you say what great art is?

Trying to define "art" is like trying to define "experience."

We all have an internal sense of what it signifies. But articulating it is really difficult.

And the intellectual fad of relativism makes it practically impossible.

Here's a classic demonstration:

Suppose I'm walking along a beach and come across a stick of driftwood.

I stop in my tracks. I don't touch the driftwood. I don't say anything or point out the stick to anybody. Right there, at that moment, is that driftwood a work of art?

I pick up the driftwood and, without changing it, bring it home and put it on my mantelpiece. Is the driftwood art yet?

I sign and date the driftwood and send it to an art gallery. They put it on a pedestal under a spotlight. Are we having art yet?

A art collector buys the driftwood at auction for over a million bucks. What did that collector buy?

Let's play the art game again.

This time, I walk into a plumbing supply shop and pick out a standard white porcelain urinal. I sign and date the urinal, and ship it to an art gallery. Is that urinal art?

The Fountain. Duchamp, 1917

I am being completely serious when I inform you that Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* is considered by many critics to be the single most influential artwork of the 20th

century.

It would probably also be the most *valuable* artwork of the 20th century, if it had not been accidently thrown away with the gallery trash.

Luckily, all was not lost. No less than eleven authentic replicas, individually certified by the artist, await your contemplation at various art museums.

One of these was auctioned in 1999 for $1.7 million.

A number of so-called performance artists have been arrested for trying to pee in these replicas. Most of them are now protected in transparent plastic cases. (The replicas, not the performance artists.)

Duchamp and his so-called “readymades” broke the Renaissance idea of art wide open.

He and generations of so-called “conceptual artists” changed the focus of modern art appreciation.

Instead of aesthetic value, the emphasis shifted to novelty value.

By the 1960s, Marshall McLuhan was being only a little cynical when he wrote, “Art is anything you can get away with.”

It seems totally fair to ask: If a piss pot can be great art, why can’t a video game?

Ironically, Marcel Duchamp was a passionate student of chess. He once quipped that “while all artists are not chess players, all chess players are artists.”

Another argument for games-as-art goes like this: Video games incorporate, and even generate, still and moving pictures, which everyone agrees can be great art.

They incorporate and generate writing, music, sculptured objects and architecture, which can also be great art.

Suppose I design a platformer with backgrounds by Michelangelo, black and white characters from Ingmar Bergman movies, pop-up quotations from Shakespeare and music from *The Well-Tempered Clavier*.

I call it *All Your Art Is Belong to Us!*

The presentation of that game is filled with great art. Games can obviously be a context for *presenting* great art. Roger Ebert admits this!

But is this enough? Does an artistic *presentation* make a game art?

Of course it doesn’t. None of you would presume to call that game “art” unless you had a chance to play it first, or at least watch somebody else playing it.

The identity of a game emerges from its mechanics and affordances, not the presentation that exposes them.

But can an arrangement of mechanics and affordances, rules and goals, *itself* constitute a work of art?

Before you scream "Yes," explain to me why *Chess* is not regarded as a work of art.

Before you scream "But it is anyway," ask yourself: Are we so ready to dismiss the wisdom of the ages to flatter ourselves?

Does it even make sense to speak of mechanics and affordances apart from presentation? Isn't it all one piece?

Or is it all just mathematics with a sprinkle of positive psychology? The gamificationists certainly seem to think so.

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It's hard for anybody, even so-called experts, to agree on what constitutes great art.

Back in 1900, the trustees of the Boston Symphony Orchestra commissioned a beautiful new auditorium.

Around the edge of the gold proscenium they mounted a series of nine flat plaques, three on the left, three on the right and three overhead.

The plan was to inscribe these plaques with the names of the world's nine greatest composers.

We can imagine the names that were being thrown around. Bach, Handel and Haydn, Mozart, Brahms.

But when it came time to actually sit down and determine which composers would be honored, the trustees couldn't make up their minds.

Proscenium arch, Symphony Hall, Boston

And so, for the past 111 years, visitors to Boston Symphony Hall sit before a gold proscenium with eight empty plaques. Only one, at the very top, contains a name, the only composer the trustees could all agree on: Beethoven.

"Everyone has their own taste," right? "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder."

This commonplace was noted by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, who strongly criticized it.

Kant's argument went like this: If you declare that something gives you pleasure, nobody can argue with you.

Subjective pleasure is *absolutely* in the eye of the beholder.

But if you announce that something is *beautiful,* you have made a public value judgment. You've identified that thing as source of pleasure that can be enjoyed by anyone.

In making such a declaration, you exercise the faculty known as *taste*.

It makes no sense to say that "everyone has their own taste." This is tantamount to claiming there's no common pleasure at all, only personal pleasure.

But experience tells us this isn't true. People agree that objects are pleasant or unpleasant all the time!

Psychologists term this kind of agreement, when a feeling is experienced by more than one person, *intersubjectivity*.

Certain people make it their business to exercise taste. These people are called (pinkies up) *connoisseurs*.

If a connoisseur's disinterested exercise of taste earns the agreement of many over time, he or she is called an *expert*.

Such an expert is Roger Ebert.

Here is a point I hope we can all agree on. Roger Ebert knows *movies*.

He's been writing about them since the 1960s. He's reviewed hundreds and hundreds of films, in print, on the Web and on television, and published over a dozen books.

It's no exaggeration to call him one of the world's best-known and most widely-read film critics.

His opinion about the relationship between *video games* and art may plausibly be dismissed as uninformed.

He admits this! He admits that he doesn't play video games, and doesn't even *want* to play them!

Nevertheless, most of us would hesitate to dismiss his opinion on the relationship between *movies* and art.

So, what does the tasteful, expert connoisseur Roger Ebert have to say about the relationship between *the cinema* and art?

Just this: "Hardly any movies are art."

Okay, maybe Roger was having a bad day. Let's move right along another of the world's great film critics.

Pauline Kael (1919-2001)

Here's what the late Pauline Kael wrote about the relationship between movies and art. Listen carefully.

"There is so much talk now about the art of the film that we may be in danger of forgetting that most of the movies we enjoy are not works of art ... Movies are so rarely great art, that if we cannot appreciate great trash, we have very little reason to be interested in them."

So, here we have two of the world's most highly-regarded film critics, sadly assuring us that most movies are *not*

great art.

Defining “great art” apparently isn’t enough. We also have to figure out how to distinguish great art from trash.

But first, let’s side aside a couple of issues regarding the word *art*.

In English, the word *art* has several meanings.

In one sense, *art* is used as synonym for *craft*.

Any *art*-ifact made by an *art*-isan is a kind of *art*.

In another sense, any exercise of skill, any *practice* can be spoken of as an *art*.

The art of cooking. The art of war. The art of motorcycle maintenance.

In these senses, the practice and products of gamemaking obviously qualify as *art*.

But Ebert and Kael weren’t using *art* in either of these senses. When Ebert refers to art, he means (and actually spells) Art with a capital A.

Great art, fine art, or the term I prefer, **sublime art**.

Art that deeply rewards a lifetime of contemplation.

Art as *cultural monument*.

The kind of art that, in Ebert's words, makes us "more cultured, civilized and empathetic."

Leo Tolstoy was more forceful. In *What is Art?* (1897) the great novelist declared, "Art should cause violence to be set aside. And it is only art that can accomplish this." Sobering, especially in the context of video games.

Such talk has earned Mr. Ebert that most deadly of anti-intellectual epithets, *elitist*.

The horror novelist Clive Barker led the mob, dismissing Ebert as an "arrogant old man," "pompous" and "high handed," adding, "If the experience moves you, some way or another, even if it just moves your bowels, I think it's worthy of some serious study."

> It just moves your bowels.

Many people seem to share Barker's belief that the function of art is to elicit emotion, to make you *feel* things, to move people. Let's quickly dispose of this.

Last April, the US Supreme Court ruled that videos of small animals being deliberately stomped to death was a Constitutionally protected form of free speech.

Would you like to see one of these videos?

If I press that play button, I promise you will experience

strong emotion.

Stomp videos may be free speech, and they certainly make me feel things, but I reject them as art.

And I look forward to the High Court's opinion on whether or not video games are also a form of free speech.

On June 17, 2011, the US Supreme Court affirmed (in a 7-2 ruling) that video games do, in fact, represent a form of free speech, thereby affording them the protections of the First Amendment.

The function of art is not merely to elicit emotion. A slip on a banana peel can do that!

The function - not the *purpose,* mind you, the *function* - of all art, high or low, from *Angry Birds* to *Hellraiser* to the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, is *attraction*.

Art has no practical purpose. Nobody *needs* art. Why would anyone bother to make art that nobody would be attracted to?

But how do we distinguish sublime attractions from the common attractions Pauline Kael dismissed as trash?

Why do Ebert and Kael believe that very few movie attractions are sublime art?

How can Ebert predict with such confidence that no video game attraction is ever likely to *be* sublime art, without

even playing any?

And if he's wrong, if a game really can be sublime art, why hasn't anybody made one?

Such are the questions I pondered as I sat before Northcote's *Chess Players*.

It seemed to me, as I studied the painting, that there are three reasons why video games have failed to deliver sublime art. These reasons are neatly symbolized by the major elements of the painting.

The most obvious has been staring you in the face since two o'clock. It's not the chess players. It's not the golden boy, his silence or his secret, if he has one.

It's the dog.

§

We don't know who, if anyone, commissioned this painting from Northcote. But if it was a commission, we can say one thing with a high degree of certainty.

Whoever it was had plenty of money.

In the early 18th century, when *The Chess Players* was painted, there were generally two classes of people in Europe, the well-to-do and the near-starving. (Get used to it. We'll be there again soon.)

Most 18th century people didn't worry about buying paintings. It was all they could do to keep their families alive!

Things got better in the 19th century. Political changes, urbanization, improvements in mass production and education gave rise to what we now call the middle class.

These people had enough wealth to keep their families reasonably comfortable, with a little money left over for the occasional small luxury.

As their social standing improved, the petit-bourgeois wanted some of the things rich people enjoyed, like nice clothes, books and decorated homes.

So around the 1860s and 70s, a market developed catering to their limited budgets and tastes.

They still couldn't afford commissioned art. But there were plenty of second-rate painters happy to provide a quick knock-off to hang over the fireplace.

These paintings resembled great art. Picturesque landscapes, idyllic domestic scenes, portraits of celebrities.

The art dealers of Munich were apparently the first to nickname this new mass-market art.

Some scholars think it was a mispronunciation of the English word *sketch*. Others claim it was a contraction of a

German verb that means “to make cheaply.”

Whatever its origin, by the 1920s this nickname had become the international expression for those pink flamingos, velvet Elvises and adorable puppy dogs we all know and love as *kitsch*.

Quite a few books have been written about the aesthetics of kitsch. One of the best is by Tomas Kulka of Tel Aviv University.

Kulka argues that kitsch is not *bad* art. He sees it as a unique aesthetic category, a special *kind* of art, characterized by three properties:

One: Kitsch depicts objects or themes that are highly charged with stock emotions.

Kitsch is about simple feelings, universal ideas. Good and evil. Happy and sad.

Your response to these ideas is automatic. You *know* how you are supposed to feel about sad clowns, James Dean and horses running on a windswept beach.

In fact, part of the appeal of kitsch seems to lie precisely in recognizing that as you look at it, you’re feeling the way you’re supposed to. Kitsch *validates* you.

Two: The objects or themes depicted by kitsch are instantly and effortlessly identifiable.

Kitsch art is utterly conventional. There's never any doubt about what it is you're looking at. It's a leprechaun, and only a leprechaun. It's Santa Claus, and only Santa Claus.

Kitsch art is *surface* art. It's just what you expect.

Three (and most important): Kitsch does not substantially enrich our associations relating to the depicted objects or themes.

The last thing kitsch wants to be is challenging. Pure kitsch is never ironic, ambiguous, troubling, or innovative.

Kitsch art is *popular* art ... and nearly all popular art is kitsch.

Our mass-market culture is so thoroughly imbued with kitsch, it's the only kind of art many people ever experience.

Broadway musicals, theme parks, casinos, rock stars, major league sports, cable news ... all kitsch.

All advertising is kitsch. All media driven by advertising devolves into kitsch.

Sequels, spin-offs, knock-offs, reboots and adaptations from other media are automatically kitsch.

Politics thrives on kitsch.

And Roger Ebert has spent over forty years in dark

theaters sitting through thousands and thousands of hours of shameless Hollywood kitsch.

Could anyone be more familiar with what happens when you apply commercial pressure to popular art?

Is there anyone on the planet more qualified to predict that video games will suffer the same fate?

Listen to this review of *Call of Duty: Black Ops* published in the *New York Times* a few days after it was released last December:

"I never play games twice. But *Call of Duty: Black Ops* has made a very happy liar out of me ... I wanted to try to assassinate Fidel Castro ... again. And break out of a Soviet prison camp ... again. And pilot a gunboat through the Mekong Delta again, shooting up sampans while listening to 'Sympathy for the Devil' ... The cold war was never so much fun ... *Black Ops* ... does not really innovate, but it doesn't have to. Rather, it reflects a keen intelligence and a rigorous, disciplined understanding of each individual element of modern game design ... It then executes and delivers ... in a way that demonstrates how well oiled a game-making machine Robert A. Kotick, Activision's chief executive, has created."

Call of Duty: Black Ops made more money faster than any entertainment product in history.

How? By depicting instantly identifiable themes, highly

charged with stock emotions. By not trying to enrich players' associations with those themes. By *not* innovating.

Video games are an industry. You are attending a giant industry conference. Industries make products.

Video game products contain plenty of art, but it's product art, which is to say, kitsch art.

Kitsch art is not *bad* art. It's *commercial* art. Art designed to be *sold,* easily and in quantity. And the bigger the audience, the kitschier it's gonna get.

Kitsch is a risk-reduction strategy, time-tested and good for business.

Kitsch is robust. Details of execution don't matter very much. You can change stuff without affecting its utility.

Sublime art is fragile. It lives or dies in the details. There's nothing superfluous or out of place.

As author C.S. Lewis wrote, "That word and no other in that place and no other."

Kitsch is like Duchamp's urinal. You flush it when you're done using it. Kitsch is fundamentally standard, and when standards change, it becomes first irrelevant, then corny, and finally the subject of nostalgia.

Sublime art is either always relevant, or not at all. It is

never the subject of nostalgia, but often the subject of discovery.

Kitsch can be brilliantly executed, wonderfully entertaining, and culturally significant. It is often mistaken for great art and awarded with honors, especially by those industries that specialize in it.

§

One way to deal with the overwhelming prevalence of kitsch is to celebrate it.

While you're here in the city, take a trolley up to the Fairmont Hotel on Nob Hill.

Down in the sub-sub-basement you'll find one of best surviving examples of '40s tiki kitsch: The Tonga Room.

The food in the Tonga Room is practically inedible. But after the second faux-Polynesian umbrella cocktail served in a real pineapple, you won't care.

In the middle of the room there's an artificial pond with a little island that floats around. A band on the island plays tinkly pop music.

Here's the best part. Every hour there's a simulated tropical thunderstorm. It starts to rain around the edges of the pond!

The Tonga Room is delightful. I smile when I walk in there,

and I'm smiling even more when I leave.

The technical term for the celebration of kitsch is *camp*.

Welcome to San Francisco, the camp capitol of the world.

Ultimately, camp is an evasive strategy. Camp embraces kitsch, but refuses to commit to the risk of creating art.

We shouldn't expect publicly traded game publishers to produce anything but kitsch.

But what about the indies? Indies are small and nimble. Their only stockholders are the employees. They can afford risk creating art, right?

That's the fantasy. In reality, indies are under the same commercial pressure as the big studios.

They have a little more wiggle room for innovation and risk. But only a little.

And if they fail, they have no cushion. If anything, there's even more pressure *never* to fail.

As a result, most indies secretly, or not so secretly, aspire to produce authentic-looking kitsch. Kitsch with a edge, if they're good, but kitsch nonetheless.

The well-oiled game-making machines manufacture kitsch. Indies struggle to imitate them. Who's left to create sublime art?

The people who create art *anyway*. The artists.

If anyone is going to *pwn* Roger Ebert, they'll probably be the ones to do it.

There is genuine hope there, but there is also a subtle danger.

If you consciously set out trying to make an "art game," it's possible that you will instead create an *arty* game, a game with the *trappings* of sublime art.

Solemn themes. Classical music. Literary quotations. Participation by artistic celebrities from other media. These things don't necessarily make a game artistic.

I should know. I've tried them all.

But this warning should not be taken as an excuse never to try. Many embarrassing failures would be worth the effort if they culminated in a single authentic work of art.

The dog is in the painting because whoever paid for the painting demanded a dog!

In choosing Northcote's painting as a convenient visual focus for the lecture, I reluctantly limited my observations to a few of the most superficial aspects of the work. Look closely, and you'll discover that *The Chess Players* is actually a rich and rather solemn meditation on life and the passage of time.

The three figures in the painting are, in all likelihood, intended to represent one and the same person, viewed in a sequence of advancing age.

The dog is a traditional symbol of loyalty, and also serves as an indicator of its master's nobility. This little fellow only accompanies the man in his youth. He is missing in later stages of life, a sad suggestion that he has passed away.

But the kitsch that dogs our industry isn't the only reason we've failed to produce sublime art.

§

Consider again the two chess players, masters of the game.

All art forms depend on *mastery*.

Painters, sculptors, writers, musicians, filmmakers and architects all require tools, instruction and years and years of hard actual practice.

We game developers are no different. But we are at a distinct disadvantage.

The tools and technology we work with are, and always have been, *slippery*.

In 1894, Thomas Edison and William Dickson introduced an improved version of the Kinetoscope. It used plastic film 35 millimeters wide, perforated on both sides. Each

image frame occupied four perforations. The film ran vertically through the camera and projector at a speed of about 16 frames per second.

Within a few years, Edison's 35mm film format became the worldwide *de facto* standard.

Cameras and projectors improved. A few minor changes were made for the introduction of sound.

But the basic format, the fundamental engineering parameters controlling the design, production, distribution and exhibition of movies, remained virtually unchanged for over 115 years.

Compare this to the first four decades of video gaming.

Dozens of computer architectures. Seven generations of consoles. Zero uniformity in processing power, memory, resolution, color space or audio. A bewildering range of platforms, from cell phones to pimped up Alienwares.

Now let's talk about the *business* of video games.

During the five years I worked at Lucasfilm, the management of the games division changed six times.

Acquisitions, layoffs, delays, cancellations, closing studio doors, lawsuits ... you've all been there.

How can a potential artist hope to accumulate any deep practice in this maelstrom?

[Imitating an Italian *prima donna*] “How can we create in such an atmosphere?!?”

§

The third reason why video games have failed as sublime art is the most subtle, the most speculative, and maybe the most important.

Is there, as Roger Ebert suggested, a structural, *intrinsic* reason why video games cannot be sublime art?

Let’s turn again to the golden boy. As you meet his haughty gaze, let me read you some of the things Roger Ebert has written about video games and art.

“I believe art is created by an artist. If you change it, you become the artist.”

“Art seeks to lead you to an inevitable conclusion, not a smorgasbord of choices.”

“Video games represent a loss of those precious hours we have available to make ourselves more cultured, civilized and empathetic.”

At one point, Clive Barker pleaded, “I’m just saying that gaming is a great way to do what we as human beings need to do all the time — to take ourselves away from the oppressive facts of our lives and go somewhere where we have our own control.”

Ebert's retort to this was particularly icy. "I do not have a need 'all the time' to take myself away from the oppressive facts of my life, however oppressive they may be, in order to go somewhere where I have control. I need to stay here and take control."

These quotes are boulder-size clues to Ebert's sensibilities.

He objects to the idea of self-directed effort as a means of experiencing art. He sees the intention of a single artist as primary. He speaks of *inevitability*. He's jealous of his free time, those 'precious hours' he has left for cultivation. He sees art not as an escape from life, but as a way to understand and accept life as it is.

No doubt about it. Roger Ebert is, like me, a hopeless Romantic.

Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860)

Arthur Schopenhauer is the philosopher most closely associated with Romanticism.

You think Roger Ebert's a curmudgeon? Wait till you meet Schopenhauer.

When he was appointed lecturer at the University of Berlin in 1820, the faculty included the world-famous philosopher Georg Hegel.

The young Schopenhauer considered Hegel to be “a clumsy charlatan.” He scheduled his lectures at exactly the same time as Hegel’s to draw his students away.

It didn’t work. His classroom was empty. He eventually left academia in disgust.

Schopenhauer was a bit of a mysogynist. He once wrote that marriage is like “reaching blindfolded into a sack hoping to find an eel among the snakes.”

He was also an atheist. He did not believe in a personal, omnipotent God.

Instead, Schopenhauer believed that the essence of the universe is a blind, irrational, unquenchable thirst to exist he called *Wille zum Leben*.

Everything we perceive is a representation of this will to live, this *desire to be*.

Because we ourselves are products of Will, we spend most of our lives trapped in a cycle of striving and boredom.

We’re constantly willing ourselves to attain our goals, and when we do attain them, we’re disappointed and move on to something else, again and again, until the ultimate disappointment of death.

To Schopenhauer, “free will” and real choice were cruel illusions, and desire a prison.

Schopenhauer does have a reputation for being pessimistic. But he really wasn't. Because he also believed that there's a way to leap off the wheel of desire.

That way is the contemplation — the *contemplation* — of sublime art.

Sublime art is the door to a perspective on reality that transcends Will.

It frees us from the agony of contingency and causality, and give us a brief, precious glimpse of what we really are, *one thing,* already complete, and perfectly ambiguous.

Bob Dylan echoed Schopenhauer when he said that the purpose of art is *to stop time*.

To Schopenhauer, the creation of sublime art was the noblest of human undertakings, and artists, especially musicians, were the high priests of civilization.

Not surprisingly, a lot of 19th and 20th century artists really liked this guy.

Brahms, Tolstoy, Mahler, Proust, Einstein, Freud and Jung were all strongly influenced by Schopenhauer.

Richard Wagner was practically a disciple.

If you could go back and ask Schopenhauer whether or not a game, *any* game, could become a sublime work of art, how would he respond?

He'd probably just pat you on the shoulder, shake his head and chuckle.

This speculation is not without basis. Schopenhauer appears to be alone among pre-20th-century philosophers in directly considering the relationship between art and games. His assessment was not flattering. In *The World of Will and Representation*, he condemns game-playing as an egregious form of "excitement" precisely opposed to the experience of sublime art, specifically calling to task "the invention and maintenance of card-playing, which is in the truest sense an expression of the wretched side of humanity" (Payne translation). This may be the first allusion to game designers in a major philosophical text.

Why is this?

As you all know, games are about choices. Sid Meier famously defined games as "a series of interesting choices."

And choice is the most fundamental expression of Will.

How can an activity motivated by decisions, striving, goals and competition, a deliberate concentration of the force of Will, be used to transcend Will itself?

You might as well try to smother a flame with oxygen.

§

Many game designers I know declare that the ideal player experience is something called *flow*.

Flow is that magical state of highly focused motivation, a kind of skating on the fine edge of effort and challenge.

Flow leads to a feeling of euphoric exhilaration.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, and Julie Andrews as Mary Poppins

Bow before Csikszentmihalyi and Poppins, Prophets of Flow!

Gameflow is work made fun! Flow keeps you joyfully working, even in your free time!

Gameflow will be the harness of the New Labor class.

Flow is painless effort. But pain management is not the business of art.

Entrancement is not insight.

Flow is *an-aesthetic*.

In my Digital Game Design I class, I define "play" as *superfluous activity*.

I define a "toy" as *something that elicits play,* and a "game" as *a toy with rules and a goal*.

Games are necessarily *purposeful,* even when those purposes are trivial. Gameplay is characterized by the deliberate exercise of choice and will towards a self-maximizing goal.

But sublime art is like a toy. It elicits play in the soul.

The pleasure we get from it lies *precisely* in the fact that it has no rules, no goal, *no purpose*.

Oscar Wilde was not being flippant when he wrote, "All art is quite useless."

If the Romantics were right, if the purpose of sublime art is to solve the mystery of choice, it's hard to see how goal-chasing can be anything but a distraction.

We can admire an elegant game design from the outside, like a museum game under glass.

Indeed, many of the video games included in recent exhibits by the Smithsonian Institute and Museum of Modern Art are not actually playable by visitors.

But once you enter Huizinga's magic circle and start groping at preferences, the attitude of calm, radical acceptance necessary to cultivate insight is lost.

Glenn Gould (1932-1982)

The concert pianist Glenn Gould characterized the

Romantic conception of art most vividly when he wrote, "The justification of art is the internal combustion it ignites in the hearts of men and not its shallow, externalized, public manifestations. The purpose of art is not the release of a momentary ejection of adrenaline, but is, rather, the gradual, lifelong construction of a state of wonder and serenity."

The conference program promised that I would offer you my own definition of art. Here it is, in all its moldy old Romantic splendor:

Sublime art is the still evocation of the inexpressible.

If these definitions of art do not speak to you, ignore them. Time is on your side.

But if they do speak to you, beware. You, too, may someday be dismissed as a tiresome old fool who doesn't "get it."

§

Games have been good to me. I love playing them, and I love giving my students a space to learn about them.

An hour or two or spent playing *Defense Grid* or *Plants vs Zombies* isn't a waste of time. There's nothing wrong with recreation. We need it. *I* need it. It's *good* for me!

But 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.

All sublime art is devotional.

Twenty-four game developer's conferences ago, I sat in Chris Crawford's living room together with a few dozen other young hopefuls, and imagined a future in which video games would be recognized as a great art form, as important as the movies they reviewed every week on *Siskel and Ebert*.

Look at us! Video games are now *bigger* than movies!

But they didn't need to be great art to get here. They just needed to be great *fun*.

You could argue that this kitschy little dog spoils the effect of Northcote's painting. But I've come to kind of like the little guy. He keeps the chess players and the golden boy from taking themselves too seriously.

I'm told that the Fairmont is tearing down the old Tonga Room pretty soon to make way for some fancy new condos.

What do you say we all head up there one more time, raise a few Mai Tais to Roger Ebert, share a few laughs … and listen to the rain?

§