In 2005, renowned American film critic Roger Ebert sparked a controversy among the gaming community by declaring video games to be, by their very nature, incapable of “moving beyond craftsmanship to the stature of art.” In the years since, many game bloggers, critics, and players have taken part in a dialogue with Ebert over the artistic merit of digital games. This dialogue has primarily played out on Ebert's blog, where he has devoted three entries to the subject. While Ebert has not abandoned his initial position, he has conceded that he has not played many games and is therefore not qualified to evaluate their artistic merit. However, this middle-ground is an uneasy one and only proves that Ebert has not played (and does not wish to play) video games. A true argument for games as art must begin by addressing Ebert's central concerns regarding the medium.

In his initial 2005 statement, Ebert claims that video games will always be inferior to film and literature because games require players to make choices, which steers the medium away from authorial control. This, the core of Ebert's argument, has gone largely unaddressed. Instead, the majority of responses focus on a statement Ebert issues later: “no one. . . has ever been able to cite a game worthy of comparison with the great dramatists, poets, filmmakers, novelists and composers.” This second claim is flawed, because it is precluded by the first. If games are by their very structure outside the realm of serious art, then no example could ever be given of a game that has artistic merit equal to a great work of film or literature. However, instead of addressing the question of whether video games are inherently inferior to film and literature, most responses to Ebert's argument have focused on providing examples of games that seem cinematic or philosophic, hoping to refute Ebert's second claim.

These responses to Ebert's second claim, that no game can compete with great works of art in other mediums, prompted Ebert to write a blog entry entitled 'Okay, kids, play on my lawn'. In the article, Ebert identifies and addresses an aspect of this argument that prevents him from playing and evaluating any game: “If I didn't admire a game, I would be told I played the wrong one.” This realization stems from the nature of the proof, that a particular game is art and therefore all games have potential to be art. In order to definitively prove no games are art, Ebert would have to play every game, which is something he does not want to do. Additionally, the definition of art is fuzzy, so it would be hard for Ebert to prove that no game is art even if he were to play every game. Due to these characteristics of the argument for games as art, the
In 2007, Ebert responded to Clive Barker, a British horror novelist responsible for the movie “Hellraiser”, who argues that games are art. In his comments, Barker remarks “I think that Roger Ebert's problem is that he thinks you can't have art if there is that amount of malleability in the narrative. In other words, Shakespeare could not have written 'Romeo and Juliet' as a game because it could have had a happy ending.” Ebert responds, “He is right about me. . . Would 'Romeo and Juliet' have been better with a different ending? Rewritten versions of the play were actually produced with happy endings. . . it's such a downer.” This remark sheds light on Ebert's underlying argument against games as art: that actions a player takes in a game may have effects that contradict the author's desired narrative outcomes. However, this is not necessarily true.

The contradiction that Ebert has identified can be characterized as the balance between a player's freedom to act and an author's ability to create a good story. This balance between user agency and story structure happens to be a question the interactive narrative community has set out to answer. Namely, can we create games that make players feel like they influence the events of a story, yet simultaneously maintain a well-structured narrative (i.e. the tragic ending of Romeo and Juliet)? A forthcoming paper from this lab (Fendt et al. 2012) suggests that one possible answer is to remove all but the illusion of a player's agency from a story world. In the paper, Fendt et al. find that players of an interactive text adventure with no branching structure (no change in the story due to player choices) report the same feeling of agency as those of a similar adventure game with an actual branching structure, given that the game acknowledges their choices in some way.

In any case, the American public is growing more and more receptive to the idea of video
games as an artform. In 2011, the National Endowment for the Arts expanded its guidelines for funding qualifications to include video games and mobile art, and from March to September of 2012 the Smithsonian American Art Museum is running an Art of Video Games exhibit, which "focuses on the interplay of graphics, technology and storytelling through some of the best games for twenty gaming systems ranging from the Atari VCS to the PlayStation 3." I expect this acceptance to grow as the medium of interactive digital games continues to mature in the upcoming years.

References