



game on

Tabor Robak's
high-tech wizardry

By Scott Indrisek

IN A BEDROOM STUDIO IN BUSHWICK, a young man is making guns. The process is labor-intensive and complex, sourced from parts that he's found on the Internet. The young man, Tabor Robak, 27, has also been Googling pipe bombs, lumpy things built of sponges and nails. He's thoughtful and soft-spoken, this young man; he plays a lot of video games. To be fair, the weaponry is purely imaginary—electronic fodder for an exhibition opening later this month at New York's Team Gallery. The guns are being assembled in the 3-D modeling program Unity Pro, which the artist has taught himself to use over the past few years. They'll end up in a seven-video monitor installation called *Xenix*, which depicts and fictionalizes the creation of the virtual guns themselves through the lens of imaginary computer operating systems, all of it interwoven with bizarre television programming schedules, an oblique domestic narrative, and maps that could depict either "Santa's plan to distribute toys or video games" or "the CIA shipping weapons around the world," Robak says. Like most of his work, it's high-tech, high-concept, and thoroughly strange.

Born in Portland, Oregon, Robak is a member of a generation that grew up with computers as companions, and he has found a certain beauty in their sprawling aesthetic, from first-person shooter video games to clip art to smartphone games. He studied at the Pacific Northwest College of Art in Portland before relocating to New York, where he supported himself with corporate projects for the likes of AT&T and Nike, using many of the same techniques that he applies to his art projects. As



“ I love the painterly process, and I try to bring that moment of freedom to my digital work. ”

a result, many of those works have a notably professional sheen. *Screen Peeking*, 2012, a multichannel piece that was shown at this summer's "Expo 1" at MOMA PS1, a marvel of technological prowess, featuring four distinctive built environments: a sort of warrior's cabin filled with meat and other bounty; a model of Lawsons, a fully stocked Japanese convenience store; a pristine, Food Channel-worthy studio in which the camera ogles invented riffs on the molecular-gastronomy canon; and a biomorphic space populated by cellular doughnuts and other oddities. As with most of his pieces, Robak expects the viewer to experience it like a painting: "You stand there and look at it, you enter and leave whenever you want." What we see on-screen is the artist's recorded journey through the 3-D environment he has built; collectors who purchase the works are given access to the virtual environment itself, allowing them to explore on their own.

Occasionally, Robak's work is more low-tech, as with a new piece, *Free-to-Play* (all works 2013), which he constructed using a \$200 megapackage of icons that he whittled

down to his 7,000 favorites. The icons form a moving wallpaper that scrolls downward across four stacked monitors; the artist compares it to "slicing a skyscraper and looking at the DNA of what's going on in the building." (Even the relatively mundane icons can get Robak rhapsodizing: He's fond of "that layer of gloss on them" that is "both a heavenly glow that product photography has, but also kind of like the slime that comes on a newborn baby.") The visual concept is based on Match 3 games, popular time-waster apps. "They're mesmerizing," Robak says. "It's easy to completely forget yourself when you're playing one of those games—you totally become a robot." In *Free-to-Play*, the falling progression of the icons is set in motion by rules that Robak has put in place, with the final result out of his hands. "A lot of my new work has a random element, where I set up these really elaborate systems," he says. "I've determined how the image is going to look, but there are details that I let the computer control. For me, that's really rewarding—at the end of the day, I can have a little distance from the piece."

A similar randomization process informs *Algos*, a virtual roller-coaster ride through interior and exterior spaces whose imagery Robak has culled from Creative Commons photographs. When he shows me the in-progress version, he's still tinkering with the fluctuation in speed as the virtual camera progresses along the looping track. The title, he says, refers to Wall Street trading programs. Money of a different sort will also be present once Robak adds in a succession of coins alongside the track

modeled after the ones from the *Super Mario Bros.* video game. He imagines the roller coaster as a form of electrical wiring traveling through the interconnected spaces.

The centerpiece of Robak's show at Team is *20XX*—a dating convention, he explains, used in sci-fi and anime to refer to "a not too distant future"—a landscape of gleaming skyscrapers, all of them bearing advertisements for various video-game companies. Envisioned by the artist as a melding of Times Square and Las Vegas, it's both beautiful and horrifying, an alien topology shimmering with purple neon, awash in marketing. "Brand and logo appropriation is an idea that has gained traction among many artists," Robak reflects. "I wanted to think about that in this piece. It's like a cyberpunk city: Everyone is being oppressed or consumed by these companies. But a big part of cyberpunk is being oppressed but loving it, which is of course pretty problematic."

When Robak asks me if I play video games myself, I have to admit that I haven't, not in years—and that part of the reason is the eerie feeling of being at home, alone, traversing an unpopulated environment. It's weird, and lonely. One gets a similar sensation while inhabiting his artworks, which, up until this point, have never included any virtual humans. "I've always



Tabor Robak in Brooklyn, 2013.

OPPOSITE: Detail of *Algos*, 2013. 2-channel HD video featuring real-time 3-D animation, 15 min.



found that figures communicate too much, or they can look melodramatic very easily,” he says. “It hasn’t been something I’ve been ready to use.” That might change soon: Robak has been exploring options offered by Mixamo, which sells preprogrammed 3-D characters—humans, monsters, animals—performing various physical actions. For a few thousand dollars, a user can purchase access to the entirety of Mixamo’s output thus far. Robak is brainstorming a virtual mall that would play host to all of these digitized souls, from the Zombie Girl Scout to Business Dan, jostling and fighting and randomly perambulating through a space that he has created. He scrolls through the site’s offerings, and for a while we watch a dead-eyed German shepherd loping in place. “I’ve fantasized about making a zoo before,” Robak notes. He pulls up a young 3-D female enacting a slow-motion, rave-inflected dance. “Maybe,” he says, “I’ll make a Burning Man.” **MP**



ROBAK ON A FEW KEY MOMENTS IN GAME DESIGN

SPELUNX AND THE CAVES OF MR. SEUDO (MAC, PC; 1991)

This is an educational game for kids made by Cyan, developers who became famous for exploration-based games like *Myst*. *Spelunx* drops the player into a surreal network of caves with strange interactive contraptions scattered throughout. No objectives are given and none of the devices come with instructions because the goal is to tease children’s imagination and encourage learning through experimentation. Combining a lack of objective and no sense of scoring or winning with a labyrinthine cave rendered in pixelated black-and-white, the game creates a spooky sense of isolation and mystery.

TUROK: DINOSAUR HUNTER (NINTENDO 64; 1997)

Turok came out early in Nintendo 64’s life cycle, so programming, optimization, and visual techniques for the system were still being developed. For the game to run smoothly, the developers used a “distance fog” effect that lets you see only a few meters in front of your character. This fog dominates the screen, creating the feeling of a gloomy dream in which everything seems to appear out of thin air.

BURNOUT PARADISE (PS3, XBOX 360, PC; 2008)

This open-world racing game is something I play when I feel like going for a walk. There’s a city and a countryside that you can

explore at your leisure. Paradise is reflected in the visuals: a bright blue sky, green palm trees, and reflective cars that wreck into glittering pieces in slow motion. The colors desaturate when your car takes damage, so you drive carefully not just to win, but to maintain the bright visuals.

GOD OF WAR (PS2; 2005)

With this game, the mechanics of the combo-based third-person action adventure really crystallized. One of the mechanics it cemented is the quick time event. Loathed by players and loved by designers, the QTE is a way to add the bare-minimum amount of interactivity to a cut scene by overlaying carefully

timed button prompts. In *God of War*, which is wrapped in Greek mythology, a superimposed image of the X button might float over a minotaur’s head, prompting you to rapidly mash the button to gouge out the creature’s eyes, everything rendered in titillating detail.

SPACE INVADERS EXTREME (NINTENDO DS; 2008)

A rhythm-based game that aims to create a feeling like synesthesia, a visual overload with particles, flashing numbers, and constantly changing objectives across the device’s two screens. The audiovisual feedback is so pleasurable it’s hard to tell when you’re losing; the Game Over screen always comes as a surprise.

FROM TOP:
Detail of *Free-to-Play*, 2013.
4-channel
HD video
using custom
software,
60 min.

Still from *20XX*,
2013. HD video
featuring
real-time 3-D
animation,
10 min.