

Art in America

“Commercial and Then Some”: An Interview with Tabor Robak

by Tim Gentles

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The uncanny and immersive virtual worlds of video games and smart phone apps are the focus of Tabor Robak's first solo show, "Next-Gen Open Beta," now on view at New York's Team Gallery (through Jan. 12). The Portland-born, Brooklyn-based artist, 27, uses video game-inspired, computer-generated imagery to depict imaginary settings or to construct fictional interfaces. Displayed on LED screens, the four works in the exhibition, three of which are multichannel installations, revel in the idealized, pristine surfaces of the digital world while simultaneously suggesting a growing unease with our increasing immersion into a screen-based consciousness.

Included are renderings of imaginary future cities, an auto-programmed work modeled on video games like Bejeweled and Candy Crush Saga and a seven-screen piece that cycles through images of computer-modeled weapons, animations of global trade routes and cheery weather forecasts, all in a seemingly benign graphical user interface.

Robak talked to A.i.A. in his Bushwick studio last week about the influence of video games on his work and the seductive appeal of digital technology.

TIM GENTLES Can you talk about the title of the exhibition?

TABOR ROBAK It's a combination of two bits of terminology from the video game industry. Next-gen is this myth that's always just slightly out of reach—it's like, finally we're going to have better graphics, the controls will be better and, most importantly, the AI will be better. The game will be more believable, the story will be great and my decisions will matter. And it never actually happens; games touted as next-gen always have just slightly better graphics, but nothing else changes.

Open beta is a type of video game testing format. Typically games are tested in a closed beta format and it's very exclusive, whereas for an open beta, anybody can sign up and play, but the game's going to be in a really buggy state. Nothing's going to be working quite right, the servers will be going down.

The combination of the two together is like a little joke on life: it keeps looking better, but on the inside nothing ever upgrades.

GENTLES What's the basis of your interest in video games?

ROBAK I've been playing video games obsessively forever, but the fact that they're a very easy pleasure, a way to escape and not be critical—that's something I'm always dealing with. I go back and forth between being fully immersed in the game and being detached from it and analyzing it. Something that's great about video games is that they offer a massively visual experience. The creators of the video game are very generous to the players. They've created this really beautiful and detailed world and you just get to go at it, whereas artwork tends to be a little bit more withholding visually, which is what creates the distance that we like in artworks.

GENTLES Do you see your work as being critical toward today's tech world, or do you adopt a position somewhat closer to ambivalence?

ROBAK Ambivalence comes up in just about every work of mine. For example, throughout the course of *Xenix* (2013), there's this total view of the world via the technology of guns and maps, but what's never shown is any type of actual violence—no bombs going off. The whole piece is really circumscribing a moment of violence. But on the surface it's very beautiful and it captures some of the joy of technology, like when you press on the smartphone and the button bounces—it's stupid, but there's a little bit of happiness there that's worth celebrating, even though there's a rotten core to it.

GENTLES The worlds you've constructed notably lack people. Is this deliberate?

ROBAK Yes, it is. I've always left out people because I find that the human form is just too legible. Anytime I find that my idea is being read, I try to add an extra element that doesn't quite fit to interrupt the process of reading the artwork. I tend to focus on the superficial aspects of the piece—the gloss and the sparkles and the rainbows—as a way of giving the artwork a little bit of edge. Another approach would be to make it look damaged or turn the monitor upside down, but, instead of going towards punk, I go toward commercial and then some.