



# Let the Games Begin

Artists are designing or adapting video games to comment on politics, art, and games themselves

BY CAROLINA A. MIRANDA

MATTHEW SEPTIMUS

At PS1 in New York, **Feng Mengbo's** *Long March: Restart*, 2008, was displayed on two screens facing each other, so that players had to turn around when moving to the next level.



It's a rainy Sunday afternoon and I'm desperately trying to fend off a squirming space octopus armed with a ray gun. My ammunition stores are low. I can't get enough elevation to leap over him. The long reach of his tentacles puts me in mortal danger any time I approach. A second's hesitation costs me dearly. The monster gets me in his clutches. And before I know what's happened, I'm prostrate, marinating in a pool of my own blood.

Okay, so I'm not really getting my guts ripped out by a colossal alien cephalopod. I'm inside a first-floor gallery at MoMA PS1 in New York City, playing *Long March: Restart* (2008), a video game designed by Chinese artist Feng

Mengbo. Visually it is a paean to classic games of the 1980s such as *Super Mario Bros.* and *Street Fighter*, but its narrative is largely focused on 20th-century Chinese history, specifically the Long March, the Communist Army's grueling 6,000-mile retreat from the more powerful Nationalist Army in the mid-1930s. In Mengbo's game, the player guides an avatar, a blue-suited member of Mao Zedong's Red Guard, through the various stages of the Long March—all while pelting an array of intergalactic enemy villains with cans of Coca-Cola.

*Carolina A. Miranda is a freelance writer in New York and a regular contributor to WNYC. She blogs at C-Monster.net.*

Clever culture jamming aside, what sets *Long March: Restart* apart from the average video game is its scale. On view at PS1 through April 4, the game is projected on two screens facing each other, each of which is 53 feet wide and 10 feet tall. As I proceed from one level of the game to

The first video game was invented exactly 50 years ago at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. It was called *Spacewar I* and ran on a computer the size of a refrigerator. Since then, video games have become a global economic staple (to the tune of \$20 billion a year) and a



**In *Long March: Restart*, the player's avatar, a blue-suited member of the Red Army, visits historic sites such as Tiananmen Square (top) and kills aliens with an arsenal of coke cans (below).**

the next (there are a total of 14), I have to spin 180 degrees to continue on the wall behind me. This forces me to dance around a gathering crowd of museum visitors while shaking off a determined five-year-old demanding the controller. (Sorry kid, not until I destroy a battalion of scaly extraterrestrials with my arsenal of soft drinks.) A few levels into the game, I'm feeling as frenetic as my bouncing avatar on screen. "You go inside this video game," says Mengbo. "You don't sit passively and play it."

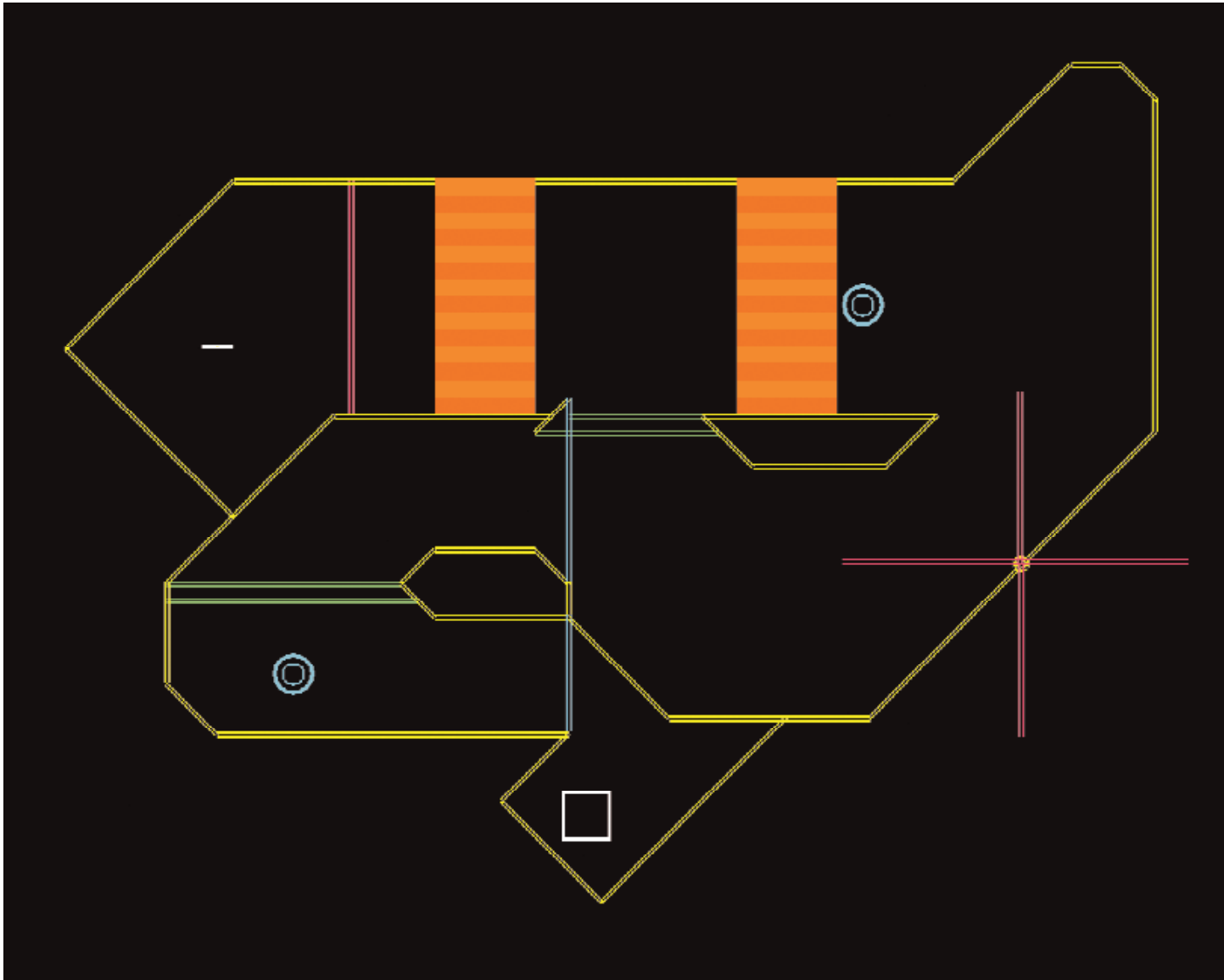
well-mined source for cultural output, inspiring movies, music, books, and, increasingly, all manner of visual art. In fact, the last decade or so has seen a boom in game-related exhibitions, from San Jose State University's pioneering "Cracking the Maze," in 1999, to PaceWildenstein Gallery's 2006 group show "Breaking and Entering" to the inclusion of video-game art in broad surveys, such as the New Museum's debut triennial in 2009. That show featured programmer Mark Essen's infernally difficult

*Flywrench* (2007), in which a player pilots a two-dimensional ship through various deceptively simple obstacles.

Early this year, the Museum of Modern Art in New York announced the acquisition of Harun Farocki's *Serious Games* (2009–10), a

prepping an expansive show devoted to the history of game design, simply titled "The Art of Video Games" and set to open in March 2012. "New-media art is still very far from being fully integrated into the art world," says Christiane Paul, the adjunct curator overseeing

A still from Mark Essen's *Flywrench*, 2007.



series of four videos that examines the ways in which video-game technology is used by the military. In February, artist and programmer Eddo Stern displayed gamer-inspired animations at Massachusetts College of Art and Design in Boston. In late May, Cory Arcangel, an artist-hacker who has long worked with video games, will be the subject of a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum in New York. And, currently, curators at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C., are busy

the upcoming Arcangel show at the Whitney. "But within that segment of art, I would say that game art has fared the best."

**AT A TIME** when participatory happenings have become an increasingly popular staple for institutions, video games represent a compelling interactive platform already familiar to visitors. "There is no threshold," says PS1 director and MoMA chief curator-at-large Klaus Biesenbach, who first encountered Mengbo's

work at Documenta, in Germany, in 2002. “People don’t feel like they have to step back. It’s a very direct engagement of the viewer. In



**For his “Beat the Champ” exhibition at London’s Barbican Art Gallery, Cory Arcangel hacked 14 bowling games so that they show perpetual loops of players failing to score.**

One of the more prominent figures working within this arena is the Brooklyn-based Arcangel, an artist who manipulates all manner of digital ephemera. He has used the home recording software Auto-Tune to redo Jimi Hen-

drix’s rendition of “The Star-Spangled Banner” and employed Photoshop to create oversize color-field works. In 2002 he produced a video game called *I Shot Andy Warhol*—based on the ‘80s arcade game *Hogan’s Alley*—in which the goal was to blast a cardboard cutout of Warhol. Arcangel has also modified games to create pieces that go beyond the traditional game vernacular. In one of his best-known works, also from 2002, the artist hacked into the immensely popular *Super Mario Bros.*, stripping away every element except for the sky and an endless loop of horizontally scrolling clouds. “Cory gets immersed on the level of code and sees that as an artistic medium,” says Paul. “He rewrites games in funny and intelligent ways.” The piece, which was shown at the 2004 Whitney Biennial and is now part of the museum’s permanent collection, has achieved renown within gamer circles.

There is also the more labor-intensive work of designing games from scratch.

Many of these programs subvert the notion of what a video game is all about, either by eliminating traditional ideas of play (nobody “wins”) or creating challenges that are Sisyphean in nature. Last year, Paul organized an online game called *Clickistan* for the Whitney’s annual fund drive. Created by a two-person team that goes by the nom de ‘net Ubermorgen.com (consisting of the artists Lizvlx and Hans Bernhard), *Clickistan* undermines the competitive nature of most video



**Ubermorgen.com’s *Clickistan*, 2010, features all manner of clickable objects, from ‘90s-style Internet graphics to elements from early arcade games such as *Space Invaders*.**

fact, the viewer becomes a participant/author.” The ways in which artists are using games to create these experiences are myriad. One of the most popular approaches is the “mod”—gamer shorthand for “modification”—in which existing game software is reconfigured into something new. Some of Mengbo’s work falls into this category. In 2002, he produced a mod called *Q4U*, based on the online game *Quake*. In Mengbo’s version, which was shown at the

TOP: COURTESY THE ARTIST; LUSON GALLERY, LONDON; TEAM GALLERY, NEW YORK, AND GALERIE THADDAEUS ROPAC, PARIS; SALZBURG; BOTTOM: COURTESY WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART, NEW YORK

games. There is no real play or scoring—just various levels of interactivity in which a player clicks away on empty boxes, gyrating fields of color, and an array of roaming Hello Kitty heads.

Likewise, in a mind-bending game called *[rootings]*, which premiered online in 2001, artist Mary Flanagan created an experience in which the traditional game hierarchy has been completely stripped away. The player doesn't progress from one level to the next. Instead, one round of play (involving such tasks as catching groceries with a paper bag or shooting words at moving blobs) might loop right back around to the same experience. "I like to play with conventions and expectations," says Flanagan, a professor of film and new media at Dartmouth College, whose game-inspired works have been shown at the Guggenheim and other museums. "Games are not generally machines for personal storytelling, but in *[rootings]* I ended up using a lot of material from encounters with my grandmother, who belongs to a generation that was left out of the digital revolution and therefore not well represented in virtual spaces."

**OTHER ARTISTS** have used elements of video-game technology to create pieces that reference broader aspects of culture. The New York–based artist Brody Condon has employed game engines (a game's software system) to create animated tributes to Flemish paintings. In Spain, the art collective Derivart (the trio of Daniel Beunza, Mar Canet, and Jesús Rodríguez) uses games to create elaborate visualizations of financial statistics. The group's work has been exhibited at the art-meets-tech space LABoral in Gijón, Spain, a museum known for its early and thorough attention to video-game art. In their piece *El Burbujómetro* (2007), players obliterate real-time real-estate prices with an infrared gun. In 2009, they hacked a hand-held Nintendo Game Boy, inserting code that allows players to "destroy" oil commodities and dot-com bubbles.

Why use video games when PowerPoint could just as easily convey all that data? "What happens in video games is that they are lived



experiences—and nothing is more profound than a lived experience," says Beunza, whose day job is teaching at the London School of Economics, and who, as a child, was transfixed by Atari's *Empire Strikes Back*. "In this way, video games are very close to life."

Given the visceral nature of these encounters—a player often fights off some force to the death—it is no wonder that video games can inspire a practically religious devotion

**For the 2007 video *Baby in Christ vs. His Father*, Edo Stern explored the dilemmas faced by a teenager from a deeply Christian family who plays *World of Warcraft*.**

In *[borders]*, 2010, Mary Flanagan documents virtual walks she took within the realms of online multi-user worlds.



Game theorist Ian Bogost conceived of *A Slow Year*, 2010, with four parts, based on the seasons, as a collection of “game poems” that require “sedate observation.”

among players. The online multiplayer game *World of Warcraft*, in which participants log on to do battle as warlocks, orcs, and elves, has a mind-boggling 12 million participants around the globe. For artists such as the Los Angeles-based Stern, it is the communities that spring up around these games and the

interactions among the players that are worth exploring.

In 2007, he turned an online argument related to another popular role-playing game into an animated work called *Best... Flame War... Ever*. The piece shows two talking masks engaged in highly charged one-upsmanship about “armor class mitigation” and “shadowknights.” Stern says he is continuously fascinated by the ways in which ordi-

nary life seeps into these fantastical virtual worlds. “There is this layer of elves and dwarves which is childish and facile,” he explains. “But it’s mostly adults playing these things—and they’re going through these intense emotional experiences.”

Despite the art world’s decade-long embrace of the format, the discussion about the crossover between video games and art can become fraught, especially on the gamer side of the divide. Among some game theorists, there is a feeling that the contemporary-art world sees the video game as something to be deconstructed rather than an art form worth exploring in its own right. “Works by artists like Cory Arcangel are very deliberately designed for the art world,” says Ian Bogost, a theorist and game designer at the Georgia Institute of Technology, who says that many of Arcangel’s pieces more closely resemble installation video than they do games. This was an idea explored at length in a conference titled “The Art History of Games,” held at the High Museum in Atlanta last year. One video-game theorist in attendance decried the fact that “for games to be embraced by museums, they have to give up their gameness”—namely, the key aspect of play.

Interestingly, “gameness” is something that is receiving plenty of investigation from countless independent game designers whose creations are pushing the boundaries of what a game can be—offering abstract experiences that are often stripped of traditional notions such as winning and scoring. These designers operate both outside the professional world of corporate development and also beneath the curatorial radar of much of the art world, making their games available for download online or in pop-up arcades organized by indie game or-

organizations such as Babycastles, based in New York City. (Since last summer, the group has hosted a pop-up arcade at an arts space on 42nd Street, near Times Square, in collaboration with the alternative arts publication *Showpaper*.) Many of these games can appear esthetically crude, with environments rendered in chunky globs of pixels. But the play experiences they provide can be otherworldly. Bogost points to some of the games produced

by the independent Swedish programmer Jonatan Söderström (who goes by the nickname “Cactus”). “He’s created a game called *Tuning* that does all of these crazy perceptual distortions,” says Bogost. “It makes you realize that there are bounds to your normal perceptual experience.”

**THE IMPRESSION OF** video games as cheap, mass-market product—as well as the reality that new media can be expensive and difficult to show—may be part of the reason that the art world has chosen to focus on certain types of gaming art and overlook others. “There are issues that new-media art brings about for the market in terms of display and preservation and what is being collected,” says Paul. Some artists, such as Arcangel, have found some degree of economic success. (He is represented by Team Gallery in New York, Thaddaeus Ropac in Paris, Lisson in London, and Guy Bartschi in Geneva, and his broad range of pieces sell for between \$8,000 and \$34,000.) Flanagan, however, though critically acclaimed and widely exhibited, remains unrepresented. Others, like Beunza and Stern, have gallery representation, but work primarily in academia. “It’s not on the level with traditional media in terms of collectability,” says Magdalena Sawon, director at Postmasters Gallery in New York, which represents Stern. “There is still an enormous amount of education that needs to go on.”

There is also the tricky issue of display. Paul says that, on average, a museum patron won’t spend more than a few minutes looking at a video. Playing a game, however, demands far more time and involvement. “New-media art is highly performative,” says Paul. “The visitor is an active participant in the construction of the work.” For institutions and galleries, this represents a challenge. Showcasing shorter games in eye-catching ways might be part of the solution—but this leaves longer, thoughtful play experiences out of the public eye. “This is where the problem of physicality rears its head,” says Bogost. “How do you then have a meaningful experience with a video game? Well, usually you take it home with you.”

As more museums stage exhibits that incorporate video games, however, visitor expectations will change. It’s certainly fertile territory. As part of the research for this article, I played experimental games that involved racing to my death, bending time, blowing up throbbing fields of color, and waiting for a leaf to fall from a tree (the latter, *A Slow Year*, was designed by Bogost). Some of these were deeply contemplative experiences, others provided ecstatic sensory overloads.

## ARTISTS ON THE WEB

Many video-game artists make their works available online.  
If you’re ready to play, here is a worthwhile selection:

### **The Intruder**

by Natalie Bookchin

<http://bookchin.net/intruder/index.html>

First shown at San Jose State University’s groundbreaking “Cracking the Maze” show, in 1999, this wrenching game reimagines a tragic short story by Jorge Luis Borges.

### **[rootings]**

by Mary Flanagan

<http://turbulence.org/Works/rootings>

The author of *Critical Play*, a book on how games can be a form of creative expression and conceptual thinking, produced this original game, which eschews levels in favor of looping back and forth in time.

### **Deluxx Fluxx**

by Faile with BAST

<http://deluxxfluxx.com>

This group of New York City street artists, known for their graphic collages, created a pop-up arcade in downtown Manhattan that featured original, nonsensical games that can also be played online.

### **Flywrench**

by Mark Essen

<http://messhof.com/flywrench>

Players pilot a tiny, two-dimensional ship through a variety of geometric obstacles in this brutally difficult game, created by one of the field’s most respected independent designers.

### **Trigger Happy**

by Jon Thomson and Alison Craighead

<http://www.triggerhappy.org>

Inspired by the 1978 game *Space Invaders*, players get to blow apart a text by Michel Foucault.

### **Art Assault**

by Paul Steen

<http://www.paulsteen.se/aa.html>

A mod on the game *Assault Cube*, this first-person shoot-’em-up allows players to blast famous artists within the confines of well-known art spaces, such as Tate Modern.

“People always ask me, ‘If video games are an art, where is your *Great Gatsby*?’” says Chris Melissinos, a devoted gamer and former Sun Microsystems executive who is now serving as guest curator for the Smithsonian’s historical exhibit. “I like to remind them that it was almost 50 years after it was published before *Gatsby* was hailed as a classic.” In the world of art and video games, the game has hardly begun. ■