Game Changers

This exhibition highlights artists from around the world working at the confluence of contemporary art, video games, and related digital frontiers. Inspired by the aesthetics, mechanics, and storytelling within games and virtual worlds, the artists create everything from two and three-dimensional works to playable games, virtual reality (VR), and machinima. Some of the digital experiences are participatory and encourage viewers to step into different realities and perspectives in a playful way. Many of these works can be shared and enjoyed beyond the museum as well, giving them the potential to broaden our horizons through a medium that can be both thought-provoking and accessible. Whether highlighting underexplored narratives, pushing technological boundaries, or imagining alternative worlds through game aesthetics, the artists featured in *Game Changers* reveal new possibilities for game-related art can be and do.

Cao Fei

LIVE IN RMB CITY, 2009
Machinima (24:50 min)
Courtesy of the artist, Vitamin Creative Space, and Sprueth Magers

Multimedia artist Cao Fei pioneered using the virtual world *Second Life* to create digital artworks and in-world films and documentaries (known as machinima). Using her avatar China Tracy as a guide in the communal online space, *Live in RMB City* takes viewers on a tour of the highly developed city. Cao built and maintained *RMB City* in *Second Life* from 2008 to 2011, with elements co-created by a diverse team of artists, writers, architects, philosophers, and other collaborators . While active, the city attracted users from across the art world and the broader *Second Life* community, particularly for its events, which included virtual artist projects, special contests, and even mayoral inaugurations. *Live in RMB City* introduces viewers to China Sun, China Tracy's virtual baby, and to the mysteries of life, both real and virtual. Cyber-mother and child wander through old and new buildings, discussing everything from Buddhist philosophy to mundane physical needs, on a journey through Cao's experiment in avant-garde urban planning.

SAME OLD, BRAND NEW, 2015
Video documentation of large-scale LED installation with sound (5:00 min)
Courtesy of the artist, Vitamin Creative Space, & Sprueth Magers
Co-commissioned by Art Basel & the International Commerce Centre in Hong Kong

Originally presented at Art Basel Hong Kong, *Same Old, Brand New* was a site-specific digital installation that covered the entire facade of the iconic International Commerce Center (ICC), one of the tallest buildings in the world. Cao used imagery referencing classic video games, which have become an integral part of popular and youth culture in Hong Kong and across the world. With these pop culture touchstones, she turned collective memories into a shared public experience that could be seen across the city. The work is related to Cao's previous multimedia projects that explore the dreams and aspirations of a younger Chinese generation and their strategies for overcoming and escaping reality. In her work, Cao mixes social commentary, popular aesthetics, philosophy, references to Surrealism, and a documentary approach to reflect on the rapid and often chaotic changes that are occurring in Chinese society today.

Paloma Dawkins

GARDENARIUM, 2015
Desktop game
Courtesy of the artist
Programmer: Kyler Kelly, Composer: Ylang Ylang, with support by KO-OP Mode

OCEANARIUM, 2019
Desktop demo game
Courtesy of the artist and The Victoria And Albert Museum
Programmer: Kas Ghobaldi

PALMYSTERY, 2017
Desktop game
Courtesy of the artist

SONGS OF THE LOST, 2019
Desktop game
Courtesy of the artist and Manchester International Festival
Game Developer: Pariah Interactive, Composer: Jlin, Writer: Ashley Obscura

Paloma Dawkins is a cartoonist and self-taught animator turned virtual reality and video game artist. Known for her fantastical landscapes inhabited by unusual characters, Dawkins creates games where winning is not the point. These digital explorer games are part of a genre known as "open world." In these types of games, players can roam and explore in a three-dimensional space rather than follow the linear progression of traditional platformer or side-scrolling games, which place greater constraints on players' autonomy. Dawkins often populates her games, such as *Gardenarium*, with profusions of virtual flora, giving the digital experience a surprisingly organic feel. The artist also draws interesting connections between vegetation and coding. She notes that both are designed to use minimal resources for maximal impact, building complexity through the replication of basic elements. Visually intense and entrancing, Dawkins' surreal odysseys through mysterious lands can be explored in the museum or purchased and played on a home computer.

Tracy Fullerton

WALDEN, A GAME, 2017
Video game
Courtesy of the artist and the *Walden* team

In this interactive work, Tracy Fullerton gives players the opportunity to walk in Henry David Thoreau's footsteps. Inspired by his influential transcendentalist text, *Walden* (1854), Fullerton wanted to make a game "that has a kind of stillness at its core." Thoreau was an American philosopher, poet, and naturalist who wrote about his 2 years, 2 months, and 2 days living in the woods near Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts. Starting in 1845, he began residing in a hand-built cabin and fishing, farming, observing nature, journaling, and waxing poetic about his society's connections and disconnections with nature. Thoreau was a complex and often contradictory figure, but his attention to and veneration of the natural world has had a lasting impact on successive generations. The observations he made about nature, society, encroaching technology, and the pace of life are as pertinent today as when they were written, and Fullerton's digital recreation encourages us to reflect on their significance in our own time as well as Thoreau's. She hopes that the game will inspire players to critique their own modes of living and to approach their lives "deliberately."

Walden, a game can be purchased and played on a home computer or PS4.

Dan Hernandez

UNTITLED (TRANSFIGURATION), 2017
10" x 18" x 3"

RAMPAGE, 2017
12" x 12" x 3"

ANNUNCIATION WITH CHEERING CROWD, 2016
12" x 12" x 3"

CATHEDRAL MILITANT, 2015
16" x 40" x 3"

MONUMENT TO THE GOLDEN ERA, 2016
48" x 42" x 3"

FESTIVAL OF THE ALTER BEASTS, 2015
25" x 12" x 3"

All works: Inkjet transfer, acrylic paint, varnish on paper on panel
Courtesy of the artist and Kim Foster gallery

Standing before Leonardo da Vinci's painting, *Annunciation* (1472), Dan Hernandez was struck by how much the scene resembled the classic video game *Street Fighter II*. Inspired by this unexpected similarity, the artist began mixing video game aesthetics with Byzantine and Renaissance iconography. Hernandez's works reveal surprising relationships between contemporary and historical art forms, such as the exaggerated differences in scale and flattened perspective found in both old-school video games and pre-Renaissance Western religious paintings. In making the works, the artist toggles between new and traditional media. Each composition begins digitally before it is transferred to a panel, hand-painted, and varnished. Hernandez sees connections and explores the visual dialogue between religion, mythology, and pop culture through the works. Using humor, Hernandez taps into a tradition that spans centuries and emphasizes our enduring interest in depicting epic battles between good and evil, whether through pigment or pixels.

Nyamakop

SEMBLANCE, 2018
Video game
Courtesy of the artists

Nyamakop cofounders Cukia "Sugar" Kimani, from Kenya, and Ben Myres, from South Africa, met in college. Originally, they wanted to create a simple video game inspired by Mark Rothko's abstract paintings for a game design class assignment. When a programming bug proved difficult to fix, it became a feature of the gameplay. The original idea morphed into a more visually and conceptually elaborate art game, *Semblance,* that encourages players to become in-game sculptors. The resulting 2D puzzle platformer game challenges players to scroll through, adapting to and reshaping the world itself while solving problems. In a clever reimagining, Nyamakop reinvents the well-known genre so that the platforms are an active rather than passive part of the game world. The first Nintendo game created by an African studio, it can be purchased and played on a home computer or Nintendo Switch.

Juan Obando

PRO REVOLUTION SOCCER, 2019
Modified Pro Evolution Soccer video game on PC console
Courtesy of the artist
Pro Revolution Soccer is part of *Pro Revolution*, a project by Juan Obando produced by Espacio Odeón, Bogotá, Colombia

For this piece, Juan Obando has modified (modded) the popular game *Pro Evolution Soccer* to become *Pro Revolution Soccer*. He was inspired by a true story about the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) challenging the Italian soccer team Inter Milan to a friendly match The EZLN are autonomous, anticapitalist indigenous guerrillas in southern Mexico. Subcomandante Marcos proposed the match after a legendary Argentine player for the Italian club, Javier Zanetti, brought global attention and financial support to the rebellion in 2004. Although the match never happened, Obando has created it digitally. Tapping into an existing Latin-American subculture of patching games to represent local teams, he inserted EZLN militants as players against Inter Milan. Because women's rights are central to the movement, Obando also added revered indigenous leaders, Comandanta Ramona and Mayor Ana María, to the virtual team. (The original video game excludes women.) The resulting work is sociopolitically engaged yet playful, and fits into Obando's practice of "presenting the screen as a site where ideology confronts aesthetics and new worlds are speculated."

THE OTHER CAMPAIGN, 2019
Banners
Courtesy of the artist
The Other Campaign is part of *Pro Revolution*, a project by Juan Obando produced by Espacio Odeón, Bogotá, Colombia

These banners are composed of images taken from Juan Obando's modified *Pro Revolution Soccer* video game combined with translated slogans from the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN). EZLN's missives and manifestos often refer to soccer as a revolutionary exercise. The banners' design features the familiar heroic athlete archetype utilized in ads by sporting goods companies worldwide—especially in recent campaigns by Nike. In this way, the installation explores the ideological similarities between revolutionary language and commercial taglines. It also reveals the surprising links between diametrically opposed actors such as EZLN and Nike. Nike is an official sponsor of the Italian soccer team Inter Milan, while the team itself supports EZLN. This installation reflects the way in which EZLN discourse strategically uses aspects of the global system of capitalism to further the cause, while simultaneously maintaining an Indigenous autonomous zone in Mexico that rejects capitalist norms.

Momo Pixel

HAIR NAH!, 2017
Video game
Courtesy of the artist

"*Hair Nah!* is a response to the perverse action of touching a Black woman's hair without permission. The micro-aggression of assumed authority and ownership of black bodies."
—Momo Pixel

In the game, players help the main character Aeva get to her travel destination by swatting away the increasing barrage of strangers' hands. *Hair Nah!* went viral online in 2017, resonating deeply with women who regularly have to defend themselves and their right to personal space in public. Pixel notes that despite the comical approach she took in creating the game, this is an issue that causes daily stress. "It's happened to every Black girl I've met," she says, "even while making this game it happened to me, multiple times."

Hair Nah! is free and playable on any internet-enabled device at the website *hairnah.com*.

MOMOLAND LVL4, 2020
Interactive pixel art installation
Courtesy of the artist

Momoland LvL4 is a multipart installation featuring pixel art, a tree sculpture, and a virtual reality game. Through this work, Momo Pixel creates an immersive environment that transports viewers into her one-of-a-kind world. Her pixel art pieces are composed of thousands of tiny fuse beads, a medium that allows her digital drawings to take physical form. In a meticulous process, she translates computer pixels into off-screen representations of her illustrations. These artworks include original characters as well as visual riffs that diversify well-known video game or manga icons. In her VR game, viewers are invited to explore *Momoland* virtually, using the headset and controllers, on a quest to collect hearts. Throughout her work—which is a unique combination of pop art, anime, social commentary, and Black identity—the artist celebrates and encourages diversity in contemporary gaming and geek culture.

Momo Pixel

PROUD, 2020
Pixel art
Courtesy of the artist
30" x 30"

HIM, 2018
Pixel art
Courtesy of the artist
36" x 36"

HER, 2020
Pixel art
Courtesy of the artist
36" x 36"

MEGA MAN, 2017
Pixel art
Courtesy of the artist
8' x 2'

SAILOR MOON, 2017
Pixel art
Courtesy of the artist
8' x 2'

IRIDESCENT NEXUS, 2020
Mixed media
Courtesy of the artist
10'

Skawennati

SHE FALLS FOR AGES, 2017
21 min 2 sec

THE PEACEMAKER RETURNS, 2017
18 min 39 sec
Machinima
Courtesy of the artist and ELLEPHANT, Montreal

Skawennati cr eates pioneering new media and mixed-reality projects that combine aboriginal storytelling and virtual environments. Through her work, she explores history and social change and imagines indigenous futures. She creates the cinematic works on view, known as machinima, within the massively multiplayer online world *Second Life*, the largest user-created 3D universe. With a small team, Skawennati builds environments and customizes and choreographs avatars in order to direct these virtual movies.

She Falls for Ages is based on a Haudenosaunee story featuring Sky Woman, whose bravery and wisdom lead to the creation of our world. *The Peacemaker Returns* is a futuristic saga set in 3025 but rooted in the real history of the Haudenosaunee [Iroquois] Confederation. These retellings familiarize audiences with some of the oldest stories from the continent, encouraging them to (re)learn history from an Indigenous perspective and imagine how all people can contribute to the world of tomorrow.

Skawennati

TIMETRAVELLER™, 2008–2013
Machinima
Courtesy of the artist and ELLEPHANT, Montreal

Spanning from the year 1490 to 2121, Skawennati's *TimeTraveller™* machinima series examines several watershed moments in indigenous history. Created using the online virtual world *Second Life,* the nine episodes feature a young Kanien'kéha (Mohawk) man, Ratorats "Hunter" Dearhouse, living in 22nd-century Montreal. The protagonist uses his futuristic *TimeTraveller™* glasses to "explore ruins before they were ruined" and ostensibly participate in key historical events as they unfold, such as the Dakota Uprising of 1862 or the Indians of All Tribes occupation of Alcatraz Island a century later. In his travels, Hunter encounters people from various tribes—past, present, and future—who take a stand for their beliefs and rights. As co-director of Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace (AbTeC), Skawennati is particularly interested in connecting the deep past with the far future through new media. In *TimeTraveller™* she employs a science fiction lens to examine the history of colonization and resistance from the point of view of Native peoples and to explore new narratives and possible futures.

XOX FIGURINE, 2020
3D print
Courtesy of the artist and ELLEPHANT, Montreal
13" x 4" x 4"

**INTERGALACTIC EMPOWERMENT WAMPUM BELT
(OVERLORD, LGM, TWI'LEK ONKWEHÓN: WE, NA'VI)**, 2020
Leather, sinew, and beads
Courtesy of the artist and ELLEPHANT, Montreal
28" x 8"

Brent Watanabe

POSSESSIONS, 2019
Modified *Grand Theft Auto V* video game (5 min 15 sec)
Courtesy of the artist

Brent Watanabe works with traditional materials and emerging technologies. He creates kinetic sculptures and drawings, as well as digital experiments using video game engines. For the works on view, Watanabe modifies an existing game, *Grand Theft Auto V*, in order to create machinima. These in-game cinematic productions use the game's graphics engine to create conceptual artworks. They leave the gameplay behind and delve into complex human and environmental relationships. In *Possessions*, Watanabe modifies the programming so that human and animal characters are uncomfortably combined. By "force-feeding" the coding for the human animations and voices into the programming for animal avatars in the game, the non-human characters develop extreme physical distortions. These glitches correlate with the often disturbing & profanity-riddled dialogue and interactions, manifesting as both visual and verbal grotesquery.

VIDEO CAPTURES FROM SAN ANDREAS DEER CAM, 2016
Modified *Grand Theft Auto V* video game, custom website, and Twitch livestream (60 min)
Courtesy of the artist

To create *San Andreas Deer Cam*, Brent Watanabe modded (short for modified) the game *Grand Theft Auto V* to transform a background character into the central focus. Viewers see an autonomous digital deer wandering through the fictional state of San Andreas. Unfazed by gunfire or abusive humans, the animal is eternal and regenerates after collisions with vehicles to continue exploring. *Grand Theft Auto V*, a top-selling game of the last decade, is part of the open world action genre. Players choose missions that involve high-speed adventures and, infamously, can also participate in more nefarious activities. Strolling through this gameworld at a benign quadruped's pace, however, gives viewers a closer look at the artistic details of the animation that are de-emphasized during typical play. The buck's-eye view encourages contemplation of the complex interactions between nature, the built landscape, and the digital domains we create and increasingly inhabit.