



Artist Profile: Tabor Robak

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If you follow a particularly zeitgeisty, technology-obsessed sector of the Brooklyn music scene, you may have encountered artist Tabor Robak while watching the glistening digital animations he's done for [Fatima Al Quadiri](#) and [Ford & Lopatin](#), or while reading about conceptual pop group #HDBOYZ, self-described as "the world's first boyband in high definition." The 26-year-old Portland native's [website](#), which contains everything from visual renderings of [imaginary geological specimens](#) to a 90-minute video of [continuous, summer blockbuster-ready explosions](#), reveals that the dude's imagination would seem to have no end-- especially where dreaming up *Avatar*-seductive, virtual environments is concerned. Most recently, Robak conceived the game component of [Gatekeeper's](#) equally digital-centric *Exo* LP, an extended, first-person journey through star-studded galaxies, labyrinthine space stations, and imaginary ecosystems so vivid that you can almost feel the water perspiring from the trees. Ad Hoc spoke to Tabor about collaborating with Gatekeeper, the beauty of "fourth-wall breaking moments," and why he hesitates to call *Exo* a game.

Ad Hoc: So, did you guys come up with the idea of the game together?

Tabor: Yeah we did. I think they had been fantasizing about what we could make and I had just finished making BrandNewPaintJob.exe with my friend Jon Rafman, and so we were throwing around the idea of making these listening environments-- something far from what *Exo* is today. Kind of like a little pavilion where you go to different lounges and listen to the songs. And from there it evolved into something much more complicated.

Ad Hoc: Did you have a concrete narrative in mind starting out?

Tabor: I did have it all planned out. I think that anyone who has viewed or played the game would agree that if there is a narrative there, it's really buried and not on the surface. But there's definitely a sequence and a structure that's made very obvious, kind of a rise and a fall. So it feels like there's a narrative, but it's left very blank so it can be whatever you want it to be.

Ad Hoc: And do you have one in your mind at all, when you play it?

Tabor: Um, yeah. It's very abstract, but it's kind of about a video game world being created for you, the person that is playing the game. It's kind of a game about playing a video game.

Ad Hoc: I was thinking about how it's more of an exploration of environment than a competitive game. What makes it a game for you?

Tabor: Well, actually, I only call it a game out of convenience. Even though a game doesn't explain it exactly, calling it an interactive virtual environment or a sequence of virtual environments set to music is so much more confusing than calling it a game, even though a game's not accurate. So yeah, I do think that it does set up people with some wrong expectations, purposely. There's really nothing to do at all in this game.

Ad Hoc: It's just kind of experiential...

Tabor: Yeah, you just walk around a little bit.

Ad Hoc: Are you a big video game person, in the sense of playing competitively?

Tabor: No, not at all. I don't enjoy that remotely. But I am a huge gamer in general. I try to play all the biggest video games every year, and I really enjoy them. Something that's really great about observing the video game industry closely is you can really see the evolution between each game, how games are evolving both visually and in programming and game play styles. And that's really rewarding.



Ad Hoc: And would you say that for these environments you've created, you're drawing very much from the *now* in digital rendering?

Tabor: Yeah, but not so much just video games-- it's pop culture in general. I think when I'm depicting something, I try to create something that's very generic, in the sense that it's kind of a homogenization of all these different visions of the subject throughout pop culture. It's kind of a mixture of generic and iconic. I'm trying to blend together all these different sci-fi and fantasy tropes, both in terms of what's depicted and whatever story exists in there.

So the opening shows this ringed planet. A ringed planet is visually like the god of all planets; it's just the coolest a planet can get, with a ring around it. So that's like this dream that exists in science fiction, that exists in pop culture, and then there's this kind of hub world where there's this wire-framed globe, and that's another one of these reoccurring images. There's something really magical about this wire-framed globe; it contains some sort of exciting promise about technology.

Ad Hoc: Would you say that you share that feeling of promise with *Gatekeeper*, in a way?

Tabor: Yeah, I think that feeling is in this new music of theirs. The music is very dramatic, and it seems designed for an experience like this, or a movie. It has a lot in common with a soundtrack. They didn't design it to exist solely with this piece that I've made; they intended it work with both.

Ad Hoc: And they culled from library music samples, from film soundtracks?

Tabor: Indeed. They use all these Hollywood sample libraries: the same sort of things that a *Transformers* sound designer would purchase and incorporate into a big bang or whatever.

Ad Hoc: What images, specifically, were you culling from? What were your libraries?

Tabor: *Avatar*, *Star Wars*... Especially the screensaver Gatekeeper had on their computer that we watched a lot, which was a bunch of jungle imagery, this kind of “Ancient Aliens” feeling. A little bit of *Tron*-- I think I’ve worked all the great sci-fi franchises in there a bit.

Ad Hoc: I read that when you were working on the project, you were sort of sending JPEG folders back and forth. Was it a situation where the music was informing what you did, and what you did was informing the music?

Tabor: For the most part, it was me responding to the music, and the songs were developing as I was working as well, but all in all, I don’t think [Matt Arkel and Aaron David Ross] were really responding to what I was making, even though we had kind of a shared vision. It’s definitely me responding to their music.

Ad Hoc: And how did that work? Did you just sort of free-associate environments that the music conjured?

Tabor: Yeah. I find the music to be very descriptive, so I just allowed my mind to wander while listening to it and thought about what colors and types of environments it made me think of, the feelings and so on. So I just made all these environments, and I listened to the music again and found the right places to switch environments.



Ad Hoc: I was reading an [interview](#) that you did with Rhizome, and you had a really pretty quote in there, saying that in your work, you were trying to negotiate between a “hopeful, teary-eyed love of the glittering special effects and commercial aesthetics” and this “dark, almost comedic feeling of contentless emptiness.” Does this dichotomy extend to the video game, or to your experience of it when you play it?

Tabor: Definitely, to a degree. The piece is definitely very empty and kind of contentless in a sense, though it’s not quite as empty as the graphics on a cereal box, per se. But the piece visually brings to mind kind of empty special effects-- the number of glowing streaks there are on the screen, and all that sort of thing. It’s definitely meant to be very capturing visually-- hypnotic or sedating. That is, if you don’t get bored.

Ad Hoc: I had also seen an earlier piece that you did in a similar vein, *Carbon*, where you’re traveling through a sort of silver, rainy environment, and you see the Statue of Liberty. With both projects, there’s this feeling of being able to enter into the special effects world and explore and indulge your curiosity. But then there’s also restrictions, this necessary feeling of limitation on how far you can travel-- like you can go there, but you can’t entirely.

Tabor: With *Exo*, in kind of a similar but opposite way, on almost all the environments you can fall off the edge of the world somehow, if you’re really persistent. There’s sort of this path that I’ve intended the viewer to go through, where there’s interesting trees and the rocks are laid out all nicely. But if you go off the path, it’s less considered and less rendered and less detailed; it’s like the video game world only exists from this one perspective. So you’re quickly reminded that you’re in this kind of cheap, video game world when you get to the edge of the terrain, and it’s just a square that you can fall off, or when you can walk through a rock and it clips into the screen, and I feel like those are reminders in the game that it is a game and that it works with the content of the game itself that these different natural environments are virtually simulated. It’s like playing some old game like *Golden Eye 007*: there were rough edges to it, and your character might fall through a wall or something. And that’s kind of a fourth wall-breaking moment.

Ad Hoc: Do you remember when *Avatar* came out, and people were claiming that they had a feeling of depression after seeing the movie, because they wanted to enter in it, they wanted it never to end? Do you ever identify with that kind of feeling?



Tabor: Yeah. I think that's a very real feeling. It's always sad when something you love ends, especially when it's an imaginative world like *Avatar*. The level of detail in movies like that is the same really fetishistic detail that you find in movies like *War of the Worlds*, which people also get obsessed with. And *Star Wars*. You know it really makes that world feel believable. It feels like it's place that you could be, and it helps the whole assimilation process of losing yourself into the content.

Exo is out now via [Hippos in Tanks](#)