ART HAPS is excited to be the exclusive media partner for Four More Years: Recess Benefit 2013 on May 28th at (Le) Poisson Rouge. Zach Gage is a New York-based game designer, programmer, educator, and conceptual artist, and he'll present a fortune-telling installation at the benefit.

I remember when I first heard about Zach Gage's work. It was 2009, and I was in graduate school. Someone was discussing the complicated ethics of his game Lose/Lose. It was fascinating to hear so much intense conversation around gaming ethics and applications' roles on your personal computer—all provoked by such a simple game. Digging into Zach's entire body of work I realized he has a passion for making projects that point towards interactions between ourselves and our machines. I was excited to have a chance to ask him a few questions and hear more about his work, process, and evolution as both an artist and game maker—to find out if there really is any difference between the two, and why his passion for questioning our digital lives through art and games is so important.

Jason Huff: You're riding this fabulous edge between game designer and interactive artist. What creates the desire to switch between different modes of production? Do you prefer one over the other?

Zach Gage: I think I'm very lucky that this particular edge can be described as fabulous. My style of work is very conceptually oriented and medium agnostic—I ask vague questions of the things that surround me constantly, and when I find one that seems particularly compelling I build a work around the articulation of that question. This has led to a very sporadic set of works in a
number of fields: in addition to games and interactive art, I've also created fonts, photos, generative print art, music videos, infographics, 3D-animated shorts, comics, etc. I think there are a lot of less prominent edges in that mix.

For me, though, the mix is important because it not only keeps me motivated and learning new things – but it prevents me from making work about mediums rather than work about life. This isn't to say that I don't explore mediums in and of themselves. Clearly I have been exploring games quite a bit, but I think the exploration I do is more about learning how I can wield the strengths of a particular medium to serve my goals rather than to be constrained by them to produce work. I want to make interesting games not to force my way through the restrictions of what games can be, but instead to ask the kinds of questions I want to ask in a way that only games can do.

To that end, I don't prefer any mediums over any others, but there are certainly modes of production that I feel like I've exhausted my curiosity to
learn from beyond their usage as a tool or context.

JH: Tell me about your process of production: What are your criteria for turning an idea into an art installation versus an interactive game? Is that a choice you consciously make?

ZG: It's certainly not a conscious one. Once I have a question in my head that I can't shake and can't get to the bottom of, I start working on building something to further explore it. This is partially for myself, so that I can enjoy following the train of curiosity, and partially for others, so that I can be eloquent in my posing of the question to them. What type of work is created depends very much on the context of the question, or the question itself.

JH: How does your latest piece, #Fortune, fit into the evolution of your work? My impression is that it feels like a simplified game wrapped in the guise of an interactive art installation. Do you purposefully blur the line between art making and game making or are you more open about the intentions of your work?

ZG: I feel similarly to your interpretation. It's been an interesting piece for me as it's one of the few conceptual art sculptures I've produced since starting down the games road. When I came up with it, I really wasn't consciously planning on using the language of games at all. It was only after I had it functional and installed that I realized I had essentially taken one of the simplest and most well known compulsion mechanics (here is a large button, when you press it you get a gift) and used it within an artwork. What's
important here for me, is that the game mechanic wasn’t used in any overt or crude way, it naturally fits into the work. I think this is one of the strengths of working in many mediums.

I’m very open about my intentions with my work. #Fortune is a piece that asks about the way we talk about our lives, and why we’re fascinated by social networks. It plagiarizes the work of strangers to use as entertainment for gallery-goers. The button is not really so different than pulling down to refresh your Twitter feed. I think this is as appropriate a use of game mechanics as you can get, and a good starting point for a lot of conversations about our societal restructuring of our own lives as entertainment for friends and strangers.

JH: Your projects like Bit Pilot, A Performance For Visitors in 2011, and Meeting have simplified interactivity. Many of your other projects have a similar architecture. Why is it important to you to build projects around simple structures?

ZG: For work that focuses on concept, I think one of the most important components is that the people interacting have a grasp of the entire system. My goal with all of my work is to drive curiosity and critical thought – I want viewers/players/consumers to be intelligently exploring the work I’m providing for them, both on their own, and with others through conversation.
JH: In a 2011 Rhizome interview you mentioned an idea of interaction through a database. What are your thoughts on the idea of being connected through a digital archive of each others’ presence? How does it change the way we perceive each other?

ZG: I think this is really one of the most strange and incredible facets of the internet. It's amazing that in a world where we are always connected to other people, we're also always alone. One of my friends once termed it “networked-loneliness” – which I like a lot.

I think we’re still trying to figure out what this type of connection means as a culture, and a lot of the issues we have online (especially regarding the way we treat each other) result from this struggle. People behave very selfishly online, almost as if they are alone in a world of their own imagination, which, to some extent, they are. And yet, they're not alone, they're inside a world that doesn’t just contain other people, but is in fact almost entirely made by other people. Your question is a very hard one to answer, and I think that’s why it’s such a fantastic place to explore through an artistic practice.

Zach Gage is a game designer, programmer, educator, and conceptual artist from New York City. His work often explores the power of systems, both those created by social interaction in digital spaces, and those that can be created for others, through the framing of games. An Eyebeam Alumni, he has exhibited internationally at venues like the Venice Biennale, the New York MoMA, FutureEverything in Manchester, and the Centre for Contemporary Art...
Ujazdowski Castle in Warsaw. His work has been featured in several online and printed publications, including The New York Times Magazine, EDGE Magazine, Rhizome.org, Neural Magazine, New York Magazine, and Das Spiel und seine Grenzen (Springer Press).

Jason Huff is an artist and writer working in Brooklyn, NY. This summer he is showing new work in a solo exhibition at the New Britain Museum of American Art in New Britain, CT and presenting two artist books as part of The Library of the Printed Web at the La Biennale di Venezia. Jason’s work is also included in the Special Collections at the Whitney Museum of American Art. His writing can be found on rhizome.org.

Celebrate Recess’ four years of ambitious artists’ projects at Four More Years: Recess Benefit 2013 on May 28th at (Le) Poisson Rouge. The evening will feature a musical performance by TECLA, DJ sets by DJ Marty McSorley and DJ AJ Slim, artist performances by Elia Alba and Jacoby Satterwhite, artist installations by Zach Gage and John Miserendino, and an editioned benefit print by David Horvitz. Purchase tickets here.