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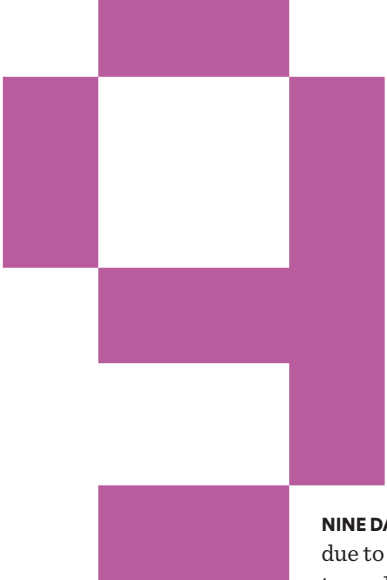
GAME

Armed with smartphones, Google Maps, and a whole lot of heart, FlashInvaders players are crisscrossing the globe in pursuit of street art.

BY SARA LIEBERMAN PHOTOGRAPHS BY PETER FUNCH
TYPOGRAPHY AND ILLUSTRATIONS BY WALTER NEWTON







NINE DAYS before his wife, Jessica, was due to give birth to their first daughter on December 28, Paris-based particle physicist Matt Nguyen squeezed in a secret day trip to Marseille, 466 miles away. On that ordinary Tuesday, when his wife assumed he was at work, Nguyen sought to photograph a red and

yellow tile design inspired by the pixelated 1978 video game *Space Invaders* and plastered on a building on Rue Villeneuve. For his efforts, he would earn 50 points on the four-year-old *FlashInvaders* app, which awards gamers for finding mosaics scattered across the world. “I really shouldn’t have been a few hours away,” recalls the 39-year-old. “All I needed was for Jessica to call and be like, ‘It’s happening!’” While he was on the train, an electricity cable fell onto the track, setting him back two hours. When he finally rolled into the station, Nguyen—who is ranked number 11 on the app—hopped off and begged the ticket desk for an immediate

return ticket so he could make it home for dinner. “I headed back to Paris without flashing anything. The trip was a complete failure.”

On his quest to join the top ten of 40,000-plus players, Nguyen, who goes by the username B-Quark-Jet, has hit other bumps in the road—specifically in the foothills of Morocco’s Atlas Mountains. He and a friend from New York rented a jalopy in November 2017 to capture two pieces in Marrakech and two located 45 minutes outside town. While mapping the trek, Nguyen found a traditional Berber village just off their route that he wanted to visit. Though he didn’t anticipate the rugged, unpaved roads they encountered, the trip was worth the flat tire. In Marrakech, he says, “you feel like a show is being put on for you.” But deeper in the village, where women were serving tagines out of their homes and a butcher offered the local delicacy—goat’s heads and brains—“*you are the show.*”

For players like Nguyen, who has flashed 49 towns in two years, seeking street art enriches the experience of exploring the world. The elusive Parisian street artist known as *Invader* keeps the game fresh by installing new mosaics generally once a week, often at night while wearing a mask. When he started in 1998, his works were mostly in the shape of *Space Invaders*. But in the 20 years since, his mosaics have evolved to include large-scale pieces that often reflect their placement, including one based on the *Mona Lisa* (around the corner from Paris’s Louvre) and a giant smoking Serge Gainsbourg (on the street named after the French singer-songwriter in the city of Clermont-Ferrand). From Kathmandu to São Paulo, 76 cities now host more than 3,600 *Invaders*, all worth between 10 and 100 points as determined by the 48-year-old artist. He often announces new work—a dragon above a bodega in Paro, Bhutan; a mermaid on a dock in Ravenna, Italy—through @InvaderWasHere Instagram stories. The sole way to boost your standing is to find those tiles and snap photos (or “flash” them)



LE FLASH
Flasher Matt Nguyen scoops up points at two spots in Paris, snagging a ghost (previous page) and an *Invader* self-portrait.

from a GPS-enabled phone before they're damaged or stolen by thieves intending to sell them on the black market. (Pieces created for auction have been offered by Christie's for as much as \$350,000.) What you stand to win, other than pride: as it turns out, a lot.

Nguyen applauds the game's knack for showing him surprising sides of well-trodden cities. In Rome, he says, some monuments—the Coliseum, Trevi Fountain, the Spanish Steps—are “so iconic they're almost banal during the day. When you arrive, there's a huge throng of people, and you basically think, *Okay, check, I've seen it. Now get me out of here.*” But during off-hours—the middle of the night, the crack of dawn—when Nguyen chooses to chase Invaders, those same sights are more magical. “I was on the Spanish Steps alone at sunrise,” he remembers, “and I saw kids on scooters, drinking in the street. Watching the city wake up is really a different look.”

Denis Gettliffe, ranked in the top 50, says snapping mosaics in Málaga, Spain, last summer opened his eyes to the city's culture. Outside the contemporary art museum CAC Málaga, which he visited en route to capturing a 30-point black and white mosaic, the 47-year-old Paris native found, side by side, eight-floor-high murals by street artists Shepard Fairey and D*Face. Inside he discovered the paintings of Santiago Ydáñez. And after seeking an Invader near the Museo Carmen Thyssen, he got a lesson on Spanish history from the 19th-century paintings within the museum's walls. Gettliffe has found restaurants and shops the same way, just by following Invader's trail of tiles. “The world is now a playground,” he explains. “I plan nothing before my trips because I rely on Invader's taste.”

That sense of adventure is key because when going “on safari,” as loyalists call it, the hunt can be as terrifyingly exciting as spotting lions in Tanzania's Singita Grumeti Reserve (where there happen to be eight Invaders). On a recent visit to Hong Kong, Zach Fredstrom, 38, an

INVADER SPEAKS!

With his identity safely under wraps, the street artist shared a few secrets.

1. On selecting cool spots for installations: “I've always studied city maps in order to spread my mosaics in all of the city, not only in the center.”

2. On players: “When the app was released, it was a big surprise to see that many people were playing so seriously. Nowadays there is a real community of players of all ages.”

3. On anonymity: “You can sometimes hear conversations about yourself and even take part in them anonymously. That can happen on the bus, even in my own exhibitions.”

4. On where he'll strike next: “My project is endless! There are so many cities I would like to invade. For example, I've never been in Canada or in Central America—yet!”

“The world is now a playground. I plan nothing before my trips because I rely on Invader's taste.”

elementary school assistant principal from Phoenix, scaled stairs and cut an iPhone-size hole through construction netting to gain 50 points from a piece on a soon-to-be-torn-down building. “When you're hunting street art, you feel more gutsy to do things you wouldn't normally do because you're like, what would Invader do?” says Fredstrom, ranked 140 under the name MarkRothkowitz. “Come hell or high water, I said, I'll get this.” A Parisian player known as Gary Invader, ranked 77, was just as determined in Ljubljana, Slovenia, where he sneaked past a DO NOT ENTER sign at the MGLC International Centre of Graphic Arts to earn 20 points from two red Invaders.

Locating the pieces is part of the puzzle because the exact coordinates are not publicized. Instead, players do legwork before hitting the road. The app's live feed shows successful flashes, occasionally revealing street signs, so competitors add that information to their own Google spreadsheets or maps. Some even direct-message players on Instagram (handles often mirror app usernames) to ask for coordinate hints. “It's all about exchanging, but you're not exchanging with everybody,” says Gettliffe. “When you are given information, you are told to be careful with it. It's like protecting a secret, and there are some secrets you need to keep. So it becomes, do I trust this player or this one?”

Connections occur when you least expect them. Montreal-based player Mathieu Boivin, ranked number 112, was flashing in New York City in December 2015 when someone suddenly called out his username, MATB. “I was like, ‘How do you know my name?’” says the 35-year-old, who hadn't yet caught on to the app's live flashing feed. “Turns out,



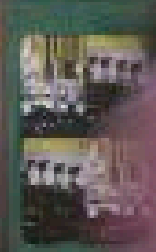
THE ARTIST
Known as Invader, the art and app's creator goes to great lengths to protect his anonymity, often wearing a mask and working under cover of night.

小劇場



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he was Olivier, one of the top five players, and we ended up going for drinks! The game is about traveling and art, but it's also about meeting people." Gettliffe points out that Invaders has wide appeal: "It gathers people from very different backgrounds—from age 7 to 77, from rich people to poor people."

In Tokyo, Fredstrom connected with Jin Funato, a 40-year-old developer who's well-known among serious players. Ranked 198 as Jinkinoko, Funato has met as many as 50 fellow flashers. On Christmas Day 2017, he drove Fredstrom, his dad, and his girlfriend around the city to capture Invaders. Afterward they all went to dinner with the graphic designer-photographer Nariaki Matsuura, who plays Invader under the name Nalice_Malice. (Matsuura speaks little English, notes Fredstrom, but they both "speak Invader.") At a tiny Shanghainese restaurant, the group gathered around a lazy Susan. "I've always been intimidated by Asia—like, oh, no, I can't get a burger and fries

or mac and cheese. But I was willing to taste things like jellyfish, tofu, and squid," says Fredstrom. "It was cool to sit at a table with such a generous, loving family."

Dinner conversation centered on their shared love of the game. Funato's sons, ages 12 and 14, pester him to drive them around Tokyo on weekends to flash. Gettliffe also uses Invaders as a way to bond with his 12-year-old son. He learned about the app early last year, when he took his boy to the Invader exhibit at Paris's Musée en Herbe. Since then, he's traveled to 31 cities and five countries, many of them with his son in tow. "I have three kids," says Gettliffe, "and this is the first time I have a hobby I can share with a son. It's very cool—he's ranked 500-something!"

There are few things about the game that aren't cool, actually. But here's one: arriving at a piece that's too hard to reach, damaged, or removed, which means it's "dead" and therefore unflashable. Fortunately, a growing team of

fans known as "reactivators" are committed to keeping mosaics in play. After purchasing the necessary materials, fixing the design, and resurrecting the mosaic, they alert Invader and his team, who then put the image back on the app.

Of course, reactivation attempts are just as illegal as installing originals, a fact that thrills some passionate players like Fredstrom, who was once chased off by the Beverly Hills police. Though Nguyen admits he's "not an expert mason," he has attempted several reactivations, including a sunglasses-wearing Invader worth 30 points on a cliff in Rabat, which did not go as planned. "Once you put cement on the back," he explains, "they become superheavy, and the lower-right-hand corner fell into the sea!" Still, he was not deterred from trying his hand at another more personal design: In January, he reproduced a favorite Invader flower mosaic for the nursery of his infant daughter, Cécilia. Shares the proud dad, "I added a little square sun." The art should evoke warm memories of his beloved pastime while he enjoys some rocking-chair travel.

Sara Lieberman, based in Paris, is a former editor at the New York Post and Page Six Magazine.

FLASH MOB

A selection of flashes from around the world, posted on Instagram by avid users. *Opposite:* A 30-point tripart mosaic hides in plain sight in Tokyo.

INSTAGRAM PHOTOS, FROM TOP: @BQUARKJET (2), @MARKROTHKOWITZ (5), @JINKINOKO (4), @NALICE_MALICE (3).

