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GAMING THE SYSTEM

Anthony Byrt on the art of Simon Denny



Smartphone showing screen capture from augmented-reality component of Simon Denny's *Amazon worker cage patent drawing as virtual King Island Brown Thornbill cage* (US 9,280,157 B2: "System for transporting personnel within an active workspace," 2016), 2019.

IN 2018, scholars Kate Crawford and Vladan Joler published "Anatomy of an AI System: The Amazon Echo as an Anatomical Map of Human Labor, Data and Planetary Resources," a revelatory essay, rich with schematic illustrations, that unpacks the extractive processes underpinning "Alexa"—the cheerful, feminine, computer-generated persona that anthropomorphizes Amazon's home-surveillance algorithms—and the slick speaker device that has enabled her to slip, elegantly, into our lives. "The scale of this system is almost beyond human imagining," they write. "How can we begin to see it, to grasp its immensity and complexity as a connected form?"¹



Simon Denny, Amazon worker cage patent drawing as virtual King Island Brown Thornbill cage (US 9,280,157 B2: “System for transporting personnel within an active workspace,” 2016), 2019, powder-coated metal, MDF, plastic, UV print on cardboard, iOS augmented reality interface. Installation view, Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart, Australia. Photo: Jesse Hunniford.

New Zealand artist Simon Denny used Crawford and Joler’s forensic analysis of the Echo ecosystem as the intellectual framework for his exhibition “Mine,” which opened in June at the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) in Hobart, Australia. Since 2013, Denny’s work has explored how twenty-first-century data-based capitalism is finally undoing any remaining balance between labor and capital, undermining the nation-state model, threatening the viability of fiat currencies, and accelerating the arrival of sentient machines likely to supplant us as the world’s dominant form of intelligence. Whereas the artist’s previous projects sprang from specific contemporary instances of the handling and exploitation of information—Edward Snowden’s leaks, the US Department of Justice’s shutdown of Kim Dotcom’s site Megaupload—this time he took his cues from Crawford and Joler’s argument that both our relentless obsession with new technologies and the greed of the megacompanies that build them are not only enabling those companies to harvest huge swaths of data from us but also doing

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untold damage to the planet. Consequently, at MONA, Denny has created a three-part waking nightmare, addressing the exploitative practices of Amazon in one room, targeting the increasing automation of Australia's massive mining industry in a second, and, in the final space, inviting the museum's curators to assemble an exhibition of figurative sculpture (including two of his own works) on the theme of labor and automation.



Simon Denny, *Digital Globe ESRI Earth observation WorldView-4 satellite Extractor pop display*, 2019, UV print on honeycomb cardboard, shrink-wrapped *Extractor* board games, Aluvision trade fair booth components. Installation view, Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart, Australia. Photo: Jesse Hunniford.

The first of Denny's horrors was built according to designs presented in Amazon's US Patent No. 9,280,157, for a worker's cage that, according to Crawford and Joler, "can be moved through a warehouse by the same motorized system that shifts shelves filled with merchandise. Here, the worker

becomes a part of a machinic ballet, held upright in a cage which dictates and constrains their movement.”²² The cage—both Amazon’s designs and Denny’s pristine white sculpture, complete with the patent drawings’ original reference numbers—is a monstrous manifestation of how data capitalism exploits the human labor at the bottom of the food chain. Inside Denny’s cage is one of the many augmented-reality (AR) “triggers” placed throughout the show, an evolved version of the scannable QR codes that have become ubiquitous digital shortcuts for everything from boarding passes to advertising promotions. Denny’s AR triggers are scannable with one of MONA’s proudest achievements: its “O” visitor guides, which resemble smartphones and geolocate users within the museum to provide them with information about nearby artworks. (Guests can also choose to download the O app to their iPhones.) Just like the Echo, the O devices are data-harvesting tools, providing MONA with enormous amounts of information about its visitors, including how long they spend in each part of the museum and how they interact with O’s “love or hate” artwork-rating system.

At MONA, Denny has created a three-part waking nightmare.



View of “Simon Denny: Mine,” 2019–20, Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart, Australia. From left: Joy Global semi-autonomous longwall coal mining 7LS8 shearer cardboard display, 2019; Caterpillar Inc. Autonomous haul 793F Mining Truck Extractor pop display, 2019. Photo: Jesse Hunniford.

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When audiences scan the trigger in Denny’s cage, a tiny bird is brought to “life,” appearing, when the cage is viewed through the O device’s screen, to chirp and flutter around inside it—the first ecological warning in the exhibition. The canary in the coal mine is the classic metaphor for exploited labor, and the artist doubles down on its presence with a suite of collages overlaying printouts of the Amazon patent with 3-D renderings of the bird—a King Island brown thornbill, native to Tasmania, whose human-caused extinction is imminent. Sightings of these thornbills are a rarity, and a team of AR designers created his version based in part on photographs and audio recordings taken of the birds on a recent expedition by a group of researchers from the Australian National University. The O devices thereby also become a means of digital repopulation: As more viewers gather around the cage, each summons her very own thornbill, filling the gallery with the growing sound of birdsong.



View of “Simon Denny: Mine,” 2019–20, Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart, Australia. From left: *Caterpillar Inc. semi-autonomous longwall coal mining roof support system cardboard display*, 2019; *Caterpillar Biometric worker fatigue monitoring smartband Extractor pop display*, 2019. Photo: Jesse Hunniford.

If the first room is stark, the second is *Candy Crush* chromatic—dominated by large cardboard cutouts of automated machines manufactured by the corporate giants of the global mining industry, including Rio Tinto, Komatsu, and CAT. On the gallery floor is a blown-up image of the 1960s Australian board game *Squatter*, a kind of outback version of *Monopoly* in which the main assets are sheep stations. The obstacles for the players, or aspiring farmers, of the original version—flood damage, droughts—have become, in the past ten years, the devastating new normal for Australian agriculture. The nation has long been nicknamed (after the title of Donald Horne’s 1964 novel) “the Lucky Country,” thanks to its imperviousness to recession, largely a consequence of the global economy’s ongoing thirst for its mined raw materials. Yet this strength is what is eroding it into a climate-change-fueled hellscape, its barren, red center operating like a microwave in the summer, radiating heat out toward the farmland, towns, and cities that huddle along the coasts and bringing punishing dust storms, wildfires, and temperature spikes that melt tarmac—along with premonitions that *Mad Max* might not be mere dystopian fiction.



Smartphone showing screen capture from augmented-reality component of Simon Denny’s *Caterpillar Inc. Biometric worker fatigue monitoring smartband promotion screen video token*, 2019.

Climate change—and the decimation of native species like the King Island brown thornbill—has been greatly accelerated by exactly the kinds of mining machines Denny has placed on top of

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his *Squatter* board, but rather than wagging a finger about our impending and self-inflicted extinction, Denny uses the game platform to transform the gallery space into a deranged, surreal industry expo. Each of his machines is accompanied by a screenlike display with its own AR trigger, which, when scanned, initiates a promotional video on the O device. The majority of these promos have been lifted directly from the manufacturers' websites, lightly edited except for some blurring and the distortion of voices. In one, the overseer of a mine champions the virtues of running an automated operation from hundreds of miles away; in another, heavy machinery goes on a *Transformers* adventure, bounding through a scarred landscape like Bumblebee.

Rather than wagging a finger about our impending and self-inflicted extinction, Denny uses the game platform to transform the gallery space into a deranged, surreal industry expo.



Boxes of Simon Denny's board game *Extractor*, 2019. Installation view, Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart, Australia. Photo: Jesse Hunniford.

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Denny's models are also a complete squad of earth-ripping superheroes: Buy the whole lot of intelligent machines, and you too can start yourself an automated-mining business. The artist, who has played with the trade fair as an exhibition format in recent years, didn't miss this chance to shill his own merchandise. At the center of the gallery is a prototype for *Extractor*, his "dystopian board game that maps the possible dynamics of global data-driven businesses or 'platforms' as they compete for world domination."³ As it turns out, some of his models are also point-of-sale displays stacked with *Extractor* sets. Visitors can buy the game inside the exhibition; they don't even have to exit through MONA's gift shop.



Simon Denny, *Extractor*, 2019, board game.

DENNY HAS LONG BEEN CONCERNED with gamification and its logics. By grafting the decision trees and protocols representing what scholar Shoshana Zuboff recently christened "surveillance capitalism"⁴ onto game formats, he has developed a new kind of exhibition making that emphasizes physically prescribed pathways and carefully routed information flows. This work began with *All you need is data: the DLD 2012 Conference REDUX rerun*, 2013, in which he made informational

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canvases for every session at the titular tech conference, then mounted them on steel barriers that unceremoniously corralled viewers into something like a security line. In 2015, he colonized Venice's Marco Polo Airport as part of "Secret Power," New Zealand's official contribution to that year's Biennale, by printing, at a one-to-one scale, an image of the enormous painted ceiling of the city's Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana and sticking it to the airport's floor. The amount of time a viewer spent with this piece was determined by the wait at passport control, the whims of Italian border officers, and how long it took for luggage to drop onto carousels. (Marco Polo was Italy's first post-9/11 airport, fully equipped with the surveillance technologies that the United States insisted the world adopt in the wake of the terrorist attacks.) At MONA, "Mine" also subtly but firmly activates and prompts audience choreography: If visitors wish to see the show's AR elements more than once, they must reset their O devices; the worker's cage, though static, refers to the astounding notion that Amazon actually considered these small prisons to be valuable innovations.



View of "Simon Denny: All you need is data: the DLD 2012 Conference REDUX rerun," 2013, Petzel Gallery, New York. Photo: Jason Mandella.

Denny’s spatial prescriptions recall the ways in which the instruments of surveillance direct our lives. He understands that these technologies are neither practical nor inevitable so much as they are ideological—designed and refined by people who, depending on your political perspective, are either gods or monsters. His art is populated by both. In 2017, I worked as a writer and researcher on Denny’s exhibition project “The Founder’s Paradox,” which was spurred by the revelation in January of that year that the American tech billionaire Peter Thiel had become a New Zealand citizen in 2011, legally entitling him to own land in the country without seeking government permission. An extreme libertarian devoted to life-extension research and technological determinism—as well as a Trump supporter and J. R. R. Tolkien fan—Thiel purchased a former sheep station on the South Island, right in the middle of the territory where Peter Jackson filmed parts of *Lord of the Rings* (2001–2003). “In the course of pursuing my international business opportunities, my travel, personal philosophical commitments and benefaction,” Thiel reportedly wrote in his request for citizenship, “I am happy to say categorically that I have found no other country that aligns more with my view of the future than New Zealand.”⁵

He understands that these technologies are neither practical nor inevitable so much as they are ideological—designed and refined by people who, depending on your political perspective, are either gods or monsters.



View of “Simon Denny: Mine,” 2019–20, Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart, Australia. Photo: Jesse Hunniford.

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Speculating about what exactly Thiel’s view might be, Denny and I attempted to map his influences. The result was a series of winner-take-all board games-*cum*-sculptures, important forerunners of *Extractor: Game of Life: Collective vs. Individual Board Game Display Prototype*, 2017, puts a graduate of Stanford (Thiel’s alma mater) on divergent paths: one toward selfish Silicon Valley glory, the other a life of organic farming and general do-goodery. In *Ascent: Above the Nation State Board Game Display Prototype*, 2017, Denny reversed the logic of the fantasy strategy game *Descent: Journeys in the Dark*. Taking inspiration from Thiel and several associates—among them the neo-reactionary blogger Curtis Yarvin (aka Mencius Moldbug) and life-extension venture capitalist and New Zealand expat Laura Deming—he created a cast of accelerationist demigods battling the Luddite forces of democracy and industry regulation. The most elaborate was a four-tiered pastiche of the colonial strategy game *Settlers of Catan* titled *Founders Board Game Display Prototype*, 2017, in which libertarians compete for property and resources, racing from a traumatized earth all the way to the final prize: to be the first to colonize Mars. In an unanticipated twist, Thiel attended “Simon Denny: The Founder’s Paradox” at Michael Lett Gallery in Auckland in December 2017, reportedly describing the artist's mapping of his libertarian universe as “a work of phenomenal detail.”⁶



Simon Denny, *Ascent: Above the Nation State Board Game Display Prototype* (detail), 2017, customized *Descent: Journeys in the Dark* game pieces, UV print on aluminum, UV print on card, LEDs,

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molded electronic wiring, Dell PowerEdge 1950 server casing, linoleum, MDF, powder-coated steel, Plexiglas, 41 3/8 × 40 1/2 × 40 1/2".

AS DENNY ILLUMINATED in “The Founder’s Paradox,” the visual and philosophical vocabularies of fantasy and gaming culture pervade the politics of The Men of Tech, not to mention their declarations of faith in the coming tech utopia. This was evident in the National Security Agency PowerPoint slides Edward Snowden leaked in 2013, which were laced with sci-fi references, *Terminator* jokes, allusions to wizards and cartoon characters, and pictures of Penn & Teller, embodying an altogether geeky language, one shared by the other NSA contractors who have power over our private lives. Denny “mined” these slides for 2015’s “Secret Power,” also building vitrines from server racks in the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, in which he presented information gleaned from Snowden’s leaked documents. The artist revealed not only the stats regarding invasive computer programs but also their pop-culture references. In a parallel set of vitrines, he and his collaborator, the expat New Zealand designer David Bennewith, carried out their very own cat-and-mouse operation: They commissioned David Darchicourt, a freelance designer who had served as a creative director at the NSA between 2001 and 2012, to create illustrations depicting New Zealand’s tourist industry. The images included references to the Southern Cross telecommunications cable, which links New Zealand to the outside world, and to the country’s secretive communications-monitoring facility in the Waihopai Valley—both of which provide essential infrastructure for New Zealand’s role as a member of the “Five Eyes” global—intelligence network (led by the NSA), which was at the heart of Snowden’s revelations.



From left: **Simon Denny, *Founders Board Game Display Prototype, 2017***, customized *Settlers of Catan* game pieces, 3-D print, UV print on aluminum, UV print on card, LEDs, molded electronic wiring, Dell PowerEdge 1950 server casing, linoleum, MDF, powder-coated steel, Plexiglas, 47 1/4 × 40 1/2 × 40 1/2". **Simon Denny, *Game of Life: Collective vs. Individual Board Game Display Prototype, 2017***, customized *Das Spiel des Lebens* game pieces, 3-D prints, UV print on aluminum, UV print on card, UV print on canvas, LEDs, molded electronic wiring, Dell PowerEdge 1950 server casing, linoleum, MDF, powder-coated steel, Plexiglas, 41 3/8 × 40 1/2 × 40 1/2".

Darchicourt had no idea about Denny and Benne-with's real agenda.⁷ Theirs was an aesthetic game with a serious political purpose, an act of "secret power" exercised over the most powerful intelligence agency in the world, and one playing against the NSA's desire, when it comes to our data, to "collect it all." When Snowden illuminated the degree to which our privacy was being invaded by supposedly liberal nation-states, the news was shocking, its implications almost incomprehensible. Now we embrace such surveillance devices, placing them on our bookshelves or in our bedrooms, where they don't just eavesdrop but actively learn about our lives, so they can sell our wants, our desires, and our fears back to us. Denny's game-sculptures are often morally ambiguous and even nihilistic about the future we're building.⁸ But they also show, in alarming detail, how we welcome the robots, the wizards, and the monsters knocking at the front door.

Anthony Byrt is a critic and journalist based in Auckland.

NOTES

1. Kate Crawford and Vladan Joler, "Anatomy of an AI System: The Amazon Echo as an Anatomical Map of Human Labor, Data and Planetary Resources," AI Now Lab/Share Institute, September 7, 2018, anatomyof.ai/.
2. Ibid.
3. This quote is the opening line of the "Summary of the Game" on the *Extractor* box's underside.
4. Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (London, Profile Books, 2019).
5. Matt Nippert, "Citizen Thiel," *New Zealand Herald*, February 1, 2018, www.nzherald.co.nz/indepth/national/how-peter-thiel-got-new-zealand—citizenship/.
6. "The Founder's Paradox" was also the starting point for a *Guardian* Long Read by Mark O'Connell. O'Connell's article discusses Denny's exhibition, documents a road trip O'Connell and I took to visit Thiel's South Island property, and discusses the moment Thiel showed up at Michael Lett Gallery in Auckland. Mark O'Connell, "Why Silicon Valley Billionaires Are Prepping for the Apocalypse in New Zealand," *The Guardian*, February 15, 2018, www.theguardian.com/news/2018/feb/15/why-silicon-valley-billionaires-are-prepping-for-the—apocalypse-in-new-zealand.

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7. Soon after “Secret Power” opened at the Venice Biennale, *Guardian* journalist Charlotte Higgins contacted Darchicourt, who was untroubled by Denny and Bennewith’s use of his work. “I was paid very well to do the work [for Venice] and David Bennewith was great to work with,” Higgins quotes him as saying. “As long as I have credit for my work I am happy.” Charlotte Higgins, “Simon Denny, the Artist Who Did Reverse Espionage on the NSA,” *The Guardian*, May 5, 2015, www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/may/05/edward-snowden-nsa-art-venice-biennale-reverse-espionage.

8. The title of Thiel’s 2014 business best seller, cowritten with Blake Masters, is *Zero to One: Notes on Startups, or How to Build the Future*. “The Founder’s Paradox” is the title of the book’s final chapter.