

TimeOut MELBOURNE

News / Art

MONA's new exhibition is a human-sized board game with global implications

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By Ben Neutze

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Photograph: MONA/Jesse Hunniford

For about a century, coal miners have been taking canaries and other small birds down into mines as a warning of toxic gases in the environment. The idea is widely understood: the birds are more sensitive to gases like carbon monoxide, so their death or illness can act as a warning to humans that they need to evacuate or don safety masks.

But New Zealand artist Simon Denny says there's another bird, the King Island brown thornbill, that's currently giving its life to warn humans to change their ways and their relationship with the environment. King Island, just off Tasmania, has lost 70 per cent of its native vegetation due to land clearing and agriculture, leaving the thornbill without a natural habitat and at serious risk of extinction. It's a canary in a coal mine with global implications.

For that reason, the thornbill plays a starring role in *Mine*, Denny's big-thinking exhibition that just opened at MONA. The title refers to resource mines and data mines, but the word "mine" might just make you think of greed and ownership – and that's pretty understandable.

In the exhibition's biggest space is a giant, room-filling version of Squatter, the popular 1960s Australian board game that's a little like Monopoly. The major difference is that instead of amassing property your primary goal is to run a successful sheep farm. Cardboard cutouts of machinery designed for automated mines (meaning mines in which no human employees are required) sit in the MONA galleries atop the board, as do hundreds of boxes of "Extractor", a board game about data mining based on Squatter and designed by Denny. While there is a sort-of game that you can play inside the jam-packed exhibition space (more on that later), you can also purchase your own Extractor game to take home, straight from the exhibition, for \$65.

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Photograph: Jesse Hunniford/MONA

The more time you spend in the exhibition, the more connections start to become clear between the various industries and ideas Denny is exploring.

"I think extraction is central to the way that businesses have worked under extended colonial capitalism for a number of centuries," he says. "Something as disparate as sheep farming, and digging things out of the ground, and harvesting activity online; they're all part of a very similar extraction model."

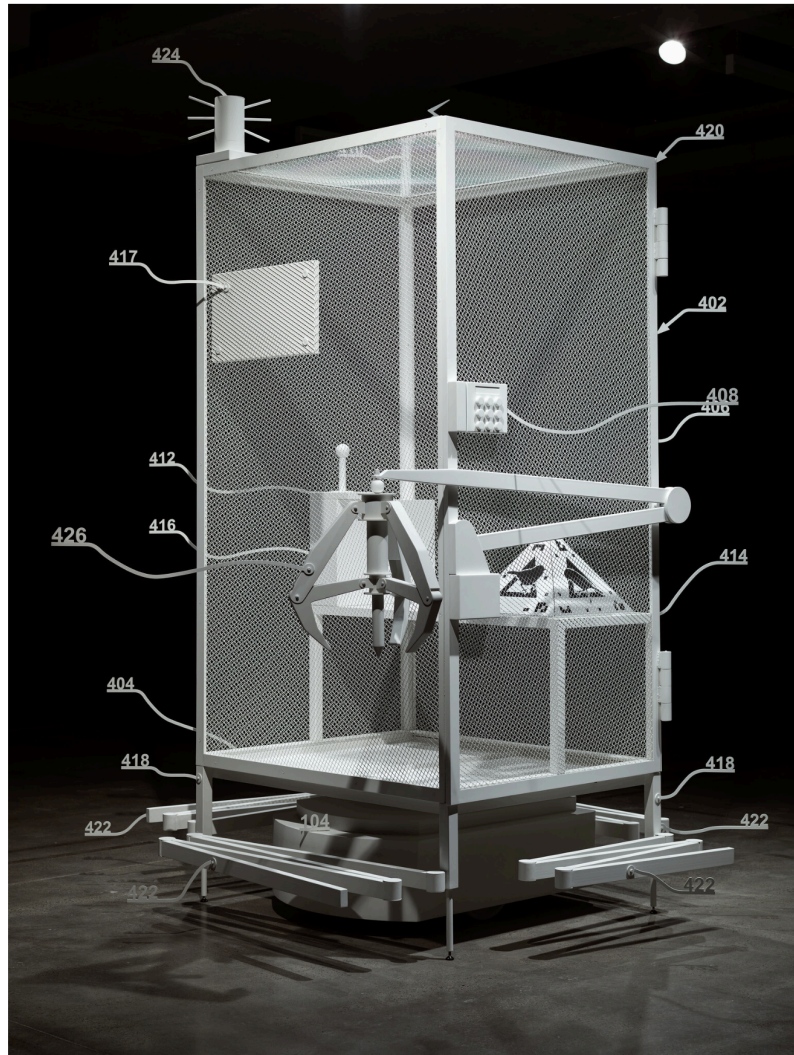
So where does the King Island brown thornbill come into this? The exhibition uses augmented reality technology similar to that used in Pokemon Go in all its spaces. Visitors are invited to use their own smartphones or the museum's "O" device to play the game by collecting information and uncovering hidden animations as they work through the space. The thornbill is the symbol on most of the icons that you need to scan throughout the exhibition, and in the first room you can bring one to life. You watch it fly about in a terrifying cage, which is actually based on an Amazon patented design for a human enclosure within which workers could work amongst robots in Amazon warehouses.

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As you move about, the museum is also gathering data about each visitor: how long you spend engaging with each artwork, what path you make through the exhibition, what you like and dislike. Denny says MONA was the only place he could imagine executing such an ambitious exhibition.

"This is where tech is meeting with art, and I'm interested in making art about people who are working with technology," he says.

It's not until you've been playing around the exhibition and gathering data and resources that you start to realise how destructive the "mining" you've participated in truly is, and the full implications of what Denny has set up.

But he says that's true of a lot of things in this world, and that the old saying "don't hate the player, hate the game" holds true in this world of extraction.

"It's a systemic problem that we're all kind of stuck in."

Simon Denny's *Mine* is at MONA, Hobart until April 13 2020.