

Portrait

ALEX
MACKIN
DOLANAMUSEMENT
MACHINES

Screenshot from *Untitled (Brain Nourishment)*, 2024

Courtesy: the artist. Photo: repro-photo.net

Untitled (Brain Nourishment), 2024,
computer components, paint, wood,
tokens, dimensions variable. Installa-
tion view, Can, Vienna, 2024



Art galleries tend not to be dens of sin, or even fun, really – perhaps because they're not installed with one-armed bandits. Grafting together game graphics, folk computing, and a lot of fake money, Alex Mackin Dolan is conditioning us into art as a lizard-brained compulsion. *Interview by Benjamin Hirte*

Working from virtual designs steeped in digital culture and PC aesthetics, Alex Mackin Dolan meticulously builds maquette-like landscapes, reliefs, and gaming automats from materials as basic as plywood and cardboard. While his initial hardware renditions of spinning-reel machines were decoys simply imitating a play function, his most recent works have pushed much further into the nervous center of automated entertainment. These days, he builds fully functional arcade devices from scratch, designing the embedded software and gaming algorithms, down through the polished tokens that operate them. Constructed with the DIY idiosyncrasies of painted wood, they otherwise look and work uncannily like slot machines as we know them from Las Vegas casinos and Tokyo arcades. In exchange for a symbolic price, visitors to his exhibitions are offered a handful of tokens and a seat at a screen. The more conventional aspects of interactive art – namely, the theatrics of performing an artificial task in the white cube – are here supplanted by pleasures competitive and conditioned – often addictively so.

BENJAMIN HIRTE

What came first for you, gaming or art?

ALEX MACKIN DOLAN

I made computer graphics before I cared about art. What has always attracted me to games is that some of them exist in an artistic realm outside the world of fine arts. Many mediums use computer graphics as embellishments, but video games are built directly from them.

BH Can you share an example?

AMD Initially, I was very interested in rare games like *Zeddas: Horror Tour 3 / Labyrinth*. It's a late-1990s Japanese horror game that was lost media for a long time – there were only some screenshots left of its very idiosyncratic aesthetics, until a copy was found on a hard drive in 2014. Games like this and the communities searching for them point to designs that may not have made it to the present day, that are almost mythical.

BH It seems that the dominant style in some gaming and cryptocurrency designs is nostalgic for that era.

AMD It's a period of time when computers were more of a fun, escapist novelty and less of a thing you had to use for work and dating and socializing – for every single part of your life. But I also see the attraction to those

aesthetics as technical, not just purely nostalgic. Older or more obscure games are often from small studios, or even from just one person who made an entire game and all of the graphics, usually working with simpler tools and way more restrictions than current AAA game studios. It's much easier to make some pixel art than to design and texture high-poly 3D models. So, those throwback graphics are popular because they're within the grasp of what an individual can create. It's important that my machines are within the realm of what I can make without outside fabrication or big production budgets.

BH You could also just buy and work with state-of-the-art assets, as a form of appropriation. In that instance, it would probably make a difference if we're talking about art or gaming. Or do you think they actually have similar logics?

AMD The art exhibition is a very rarified experience, whereas games are typically mass-market products. By turning that on its head a bit and making the digital experience in-person and discrete, I think I put both logics to work. I want to make this rare, addictive experience that's contingent on the framework of art, but which also reorders the components. I have this idea that someone could become addicted to art.

BH You build these automats that work like slot machines ...

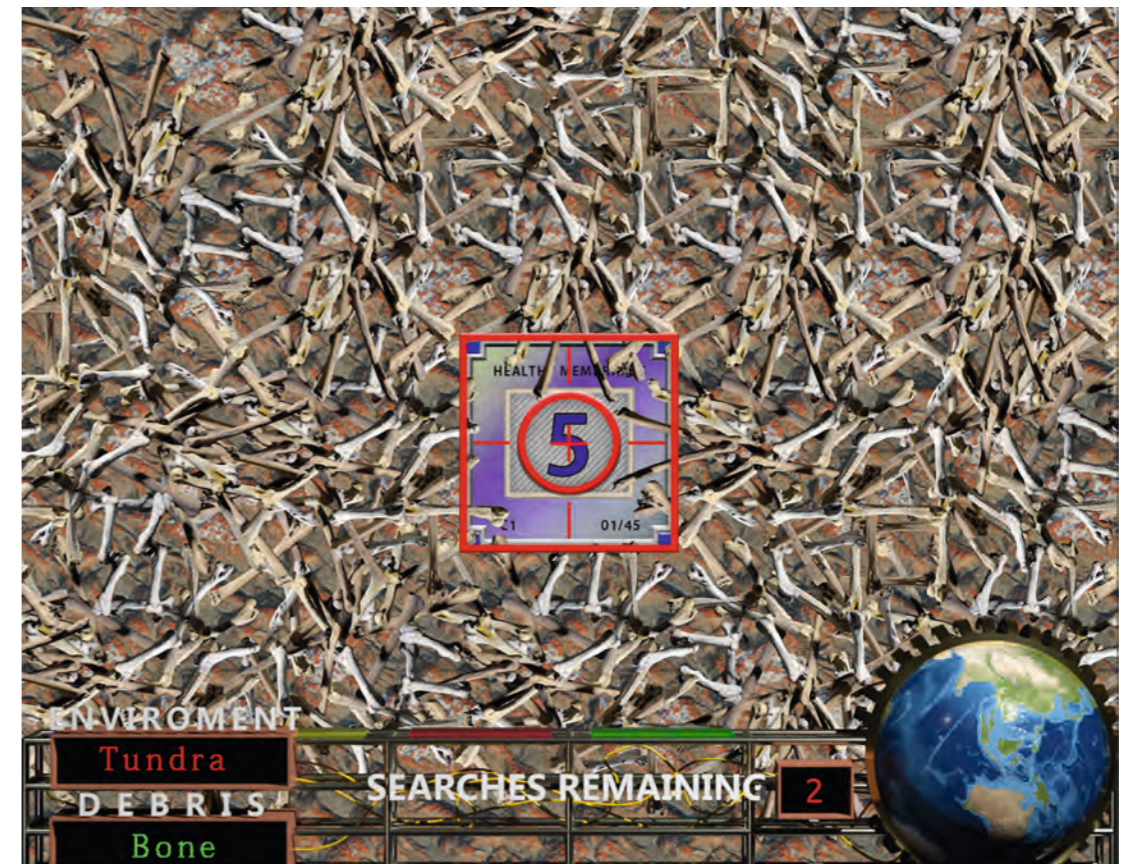
AMD I call them *amusement machines*. I think that's the right way to refer to game cabinets which are point-based or just for fun – anything from coin pushers to video poker – and don't actually pay out any money. I can guess a little at how slot machines work based on some research I've done, but I have no real understanding of their complex randomization algorithms. Mine use weighted randomization, virtual reels, and return-to-player models in their most basic iterations.

BH There's a large industry behind them, which must be hard to compete with. Maybe your machines are like a cartoon version of the conventional machines?

AMD My goal is to make my own machines – they're amateur and personal, as I have to figure out all the parts myself. What I've done works surprisingly well in terms of engaging people – almost too well for how simple they are. It makes me think that the people who are really good at writing these algorithms are up to some really demented shit in manipulating human psychology.



Screenshots from *Organ Grid*, 2021



People always tell themselves there's a trick to it, even if you explicitly tell them there's no trick. It's like a Skinner box.



The Control Panel / DJ Booth / Children's Toy / Piloting System of Life, Black, 2017
Wood, synthetic polymer paint, plexiglass, archival inkjet prints, 97 x 158 x 107 cm



Bad Artifact, in Single Panel "Mystic Miner"
Cabinet, Black, 2019, wood, paint, plastic, inkjet prints, 40 x 50 x 5.5 cm

BH On a machine of yours I played recently, it seemed like the chance of losing was slightly higher overall than the chance of winning. Is that true generally in gambling?

AMD You want the "return to player" to be under one hundred percent, so that every time someone plays, they win some percentage back, but ultimately lose over time. I didn't initially know how important that was. Playing the first full-fledged machine I made, *Organ Grid* (2021), you'd win more than you'd lose, because I thought that would be more fun.

BH A game where you win a lot actually sounds boring.

AMD Well, it was ... People just gave up immediately. It turns out the fun is in losing.

BH There was basically no skill involved playing the machine you installed in "Brain Nourishment" (*Untitled*, 2024 at Can, Vienna) – you press the button, and the rest is basically chance. Still, it feels like an achievement when you do win, which must be a placebo effect. The coins you designed are not worth money.

AMD Yeah, people always tell themselves there's a trick to it, even if you explicitly tell them there's no trick. It's like a Skinner box.

BH What's a Skinner box?

AMD It's this classic experiment in behavioral conditioning, where a lab rat presses a lever and receives food. It's thrown around in designing games, where you perform an action and receive a reward, such that you tend towards performing the action again. For rats, it's food. For us, it's just a big star that says, "Good Job" – or the sound of coins.

BH The sound of coins is very fulfilling, even when you know it's not real money.

AMD Yes! The best part of creating these works is always designing the coins.

BH On the whole, it looks like a very sculptural process to me.

AMD They have a lot of different elements: wood, electronics, coins, plus game-design features like graphics, sound, and interactivity, all of which are self-contained. Being digital and analog simultaneously gives them all these different capacities.

BH You once suggested to me the idea of placing the machines in a bar and making some money, without it necessarily being an art project.

AMD If I'm putting it in an art gallery, then there's no real pressure for it to totally make sense. I have some liberties in terms of how abstract the machines can be. You only played the one in "Brain Nourishment," right? That was the least abstract one.

BH Yes. You mean it's the most similar to conventional gaming machines?

AMD *Organ Grid* was really abstract, to the point where even gamer friends of mine struggled to understand what was happening. *Really New God* (2022) was too, but it was also very difficult to do the wrong thing; it played itself as long as you kept putting money in. The one at Can was meant to be more interactive and compulsive, and it ended up being closer to a slot machine.

BH There's always the need in exhibition spaces to explain a little what's on view, but here, the explanation was basically how the game works. Everybody was happy with that: Visitors could just sit down and play the game, which created a very nice applied atmosphere. People were busy.

Having multiple machines naturally creates a social element, because even though all the machines are the same, someone is going to win first.



Untitled (Really New God), 2022
Computer components, paint, wood, 114 x 67 x 74 cm

Courtesy: the artist. Photo: repro-photo.net

AMD It's strange, though, because it seems a bit cynical to me that people are so willing to accept being manipulated like that. Do you know what I mean? It's a bit dark, compulsively playing until you run out of tokens. Despite that, the most common feedback I get from people is that they had fun, which is not exactly a typical response to art shows.

BH In the end, it's just a game. Of course, if we talk about the machine in an art context, there's a cynical note to it: It implies actual gambling, which can be brutally addictive.

AMD I guess I'm leaning into this on purpose. When I think about previous works I made that focussed on control panels, at some point, I would find myself thinking of making a play-place for curators and art audiences that I didn't respect. I thought, I'll just give their child brains little shapes to be happy with.

BH Usually, your installations involve more than one machine. What kind of challenge does this seriality create, when people start to stand beside each other?

AMD Having multiple machines naturally creates a social element, because even though all the machines are the same, someone is going to win first. Giving rewards out to people in different quantities, at different intervals, opens up really base-level human emotions like jealousy. It wasn't so clear to me at first, but at my 2022 show "Really New God" [at David Lewis, New York], I was able to see many people playing at the opening, and the players definitely encouraged each other. That's not completely true about machine gambling, as it's more common now to gamble in isolation. In terms of amusement, having company does seem to make a difference.

BH If you had a larger budget, would you design the machines to be industrially produced? Or is the DIY part crucial?

AMD For me, I think most of the pleasure comes from making them. In a way, I'm pretending to make folk-art computers. I grew up going to this boardwalk arcade where my grandmother lived in New Hampshire called the Casino, which had these rows of old wooden games. And in Japan, there are medal games – coin-based machines that feel a lot like gambling, but which are just for fun. Mechanically speaking, these in-person traditions exceed anything I have done. But if I had a bigger budget, maybe I could do some more interesting stuff electrically.

BH I wouldn't immediately relate arcade gaming to folk art, but that makes a lot of sense.

AMD Well, if you're using wood to make art, it tends to come up.

BH There are some details on your machines that look simultaneously ornamental and practical, like these round shapes where two sheets of wood meet. Are they arbitrary adornments or actual tongue-and-groove connections?

AMD The machines often have fake plugs or bolts or screw covers that don't actually do anything. Maybe it's corny, but they're my machines: I dream them up, so I want them to belong to their own world, one which I consider to be made up of contradictions. They're new and old, real and fake, cheap and slick.

BH A lot of your previous work has culminated in the amusement machines. Where do you go from here?

AMD I'm already working on a new machine. In Natasha Dow Schüll's book *Addiction by Design: Machine Gambling in Las Vegas* [2012], there's a case study about a machine-gambling addict who becomes a slots repair person because she thinks that, by learning how the machines work, she can cure her addiction. In a way, I can relate. —



Untitled (Brain Nourishment) (detail), 2024

ALEX MACKIN DOLAN (*1990, Colorado) is an artist living in New York. Recent shows took place at Can, Vienna (2024); David Lewis, New York (2022); and 649, Tokyo (2019).

BENJAMIN HIRTE is an artist and writer based in Berlin and Vienna. He co-founded the artist-run exhibition space Can in Vienna.