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Nadja Sayej, “Simon Denny: the artist explaining blockchain with Pokémon,” *The Guardian*, August 26, 2016.



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Art

Simon Denny: the artist explaining blockchain with Pokémon

His 'fan art' exhibition tells the story of blockchain visionaries, bitcoin and the future of cryptocurrency through the mediums of cartoons and board games

Nadja Sayej

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Simon Denny: 'It's a dense idea and it puts a lot of people off.' Photograph: Guy Bell/REX Shutterstock

New Zealand artist Simon Denny doesn't look like a stereotypical bohemian artist. Donning a navy blue T-shirt with matching track pants and jacket with clean sneakers, he could easily be mistaken for a corporate banker on his day off.

Even in the way he talks about money – he throws around business jargon like “global governance”, “distributed ledger” and “blockchain” – Denny could easily pass as a startup founder or business analyst, even a finance reporter. But the truth is, he is a technology finance groupie, and what he really makes is fan art.

“I make fan art. I'm like a geeky fan,” says the 32-year-old, over a cappuccino on the 24th floor PanoramaCafé in his adopted home of Berlin.

His forthcoming exhibition – Blockchain Future States – opens 8 September at Petzel Gallery in New York City and puts his geeky “fan art” on view. The gallery will be used as an altar to worship three blockchain visionaries (blockchain is the decentralized transaction database for the cryptocurrency bitcoin and has been described as even the “the future of the internet”), or tech finance celebrities, who could potentially shape the future of how we send and receive money.

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“I thought making fan art would be a more simple way to tell the story I want to tell,” Denny said. “I’m hoping to give people a wider and easier understanding of different visions of the future.”



But how does one artist go about explaining “blockchain” to art gallery goers? The term is certainly abstract and the art world loves abstraction, albeit usually of a different kind.

Denny’s interest in the concept dates to 2008 when bitcoin was invented as a non-national cryptocurrency after the global financial crisis. “Some of us don’t trust nation states and central banks to make our global systems work,” he said. “That’s our start; the birth of bitcoin.”

Denny, who often apologizes for the complexity of his work during interviews, gets easily excited and almost giddy when explaining how much fun he has making art out of dense, financial jargon. “It’s a dense idea and it puts a lot of people off because of its language but it’s really something that’s moving things,” he said.

To break it down, Denny has created an exhibition that explains blockchain through games – specifically the Risk board game and Pokémon cartoons. “I tried to make it accessible to people who haven’t heard of a cryptocurrency in a fun and easy way,” Denny said.

The exhibition features a giant Pokéball alongside a cut-out of the Pokémon protagonist Ash Ketchum as a starting point to explain the lingering bitcoin mystery: who really invented bitcoin?

The Australian computer scientist Craig Wright claims to have founded the cryptocurrency under the fake name “Satoshi Nakamoto”, or so he said in a recent interview. Apparently, Wright’s pseudonym takes its origins from Pokémon. “Satoshi” is the Japanese name for Ash, and the last name “Nakamoto” is named after 17th century Japanese philosopher Tominaga Nakamoto, who criticized Confucianism.

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It provides a wealth of metaphors for the artist. “Ash’ rises from the ashes of the current currency system, he becomes the savior of how the cryptocurrency saves us,” says Denny.

The exhibition also features three different versions of the 1959 war-based board game Risk, which Denny created to show three blockchain enthusiast’s view of the future; that includes economist Blythe Masters, CEO of blockchain tech company Digital Asset, investor Balaji Srinivasan, CEO of Bitcoin startup 21 Inc, and programmer Vitalik Buterin, co-founder of a cryptocurrency called ether and its company, Ethereum.

They’re all revolutionary, as well as controversial, in their own different way: Masters, who was incorrectly called the woman who built the “financial weapon of mass destruction” in 2008, is an English economist attempting to bring blockchain to global markets. Denny has designed her Risk game to replace the world’s countries with financial centers and a dice made of the world’s different currencies.

Srinivasan, a Silicon Valley scene stalwart who has blocked a journalist who tried to start an argument with him on Twitter, believes bitcoin will give the world a free market separate from government regulations. So his Risk game has a shore and offshore territories where people can build clouds in an island in the middle of the ocean.

As for 22-year-old Russian programmer Buterin, who Denny calls “the Luke Skywalker of the cryptocurrency circuit”, Denny has created an intergalactic version of the Risk board game that takes place in outer space with network-to-network paths and players. In real life, Buterin is often painted as a fantastical savior figure for his crowdfunding venture capital firm Ethereum (until it recently fell victim to a \$50m hack).

Each game design reveals how Denny interprets each blockchain visionary and their agenda for world domination; and what blockchain can do for the world. But in a time when bitcoin’s power is often doubted and it does have a volatile past, including the recent \$78m hack in Hong Kong which caused a 20% drop in the cryptocurrency’s value, Denny remains optimistic when making fan art about each blockchain visionary. And that’s a quality he seems to admire.

“At least people are dreaming and seriously building a global financial system that is more fair to people,” Denny said. “They’re keeping the hope alive and moving forward to fairer global future, which is what I’d like to see the world go into.”

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/aug/26/simon-denny-artist-blockchain-pokemon>