

ALEX DRAGULESCU CREATES ART FROM ELECTRONIC DATA – 'INFORMATION VISUALIZATION'

Seeing the art in computer games

ARTIST: Alex Dragulescu

FAVORED MEDIA: Computer games, digital databases

VENUE: Experimental Game Lab, UCSD

SELECTED WORKS: "Blogbot," "Havoc," "Pseudocode," "Suspended Gardens"

KEY COMMENT: "(The artist) Jackson Pollock said painting should be about one's times – kind of expressing the times you live in. In a way, I'm doing that, too."

WEB SITE: www.sq.ro

By James Hebert
ARTS WRITER

Petals unfold into delicate blossoms, forming a golden bouquet. Behold the glory of spam.

Those noxious e-mail sales pitches that clog our computer in-boxes aren't normally noted for their elegance. But in the hands of Alex Dragulescu, they prove capable of producing beauty.

Dragulescu, 28, is an artist whose raw materials are the vast streams of electronic data underlying everything from video games to e-mail to the Web. He takes this information and repurposes it, using his expertise in programming to make the data behave in ways it was never intended.

He refers to this as "information visualization," and it's the idea behind a series of projects Dragulescu has developed in his three years at UCSD — first as a graduate student, and now as the manager of the university's Experimental Game Lab.

In a work called "Pseudocode," for example, Dragulescu

compiled text from spam, blogs and other sources, then wrote a program that takes its cues from letter sequences and other patterns to create 3-D computer images resembling flowers (or buildings, or sea anemones).

"There are certain parameters of the plant — the density, the size of the petals, things like that," Dragulescu says, explaining how the spam goes botanical. "All those are generated based on the text. It's a kind of data mapping."

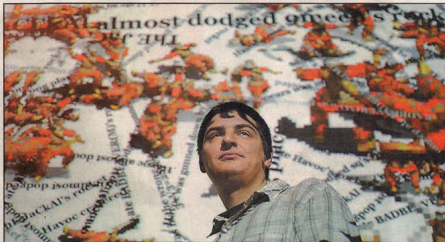
The experience is not limited to the computer screen. Last April, Dragulescu and his sometime collaborator Tim Jaeger went onstage during an electronic-arts festival in Finland to perform a work called "Inbox," part of a larger project titled "Respam."

The pair "deejay'd and veejay'd with spam," Dragulescu says. "We created music and visuals with this database of spam."

And what is the sound of spam?

"It's kind of like noise," he says with a smile.

Beyond the scourge of spam,



what drives Dragulescu's work is a fascination with the culture of electronic games. And for that, he's in a pretty good place.

The Experimental Game Lab is part of UCSD's Center for Research in Computing and the Arts, which itself is housed in the sleek new Calit2 facility.

In the loftlike lab, amid banks of computers, Dragulescu helps supervise the work of visual-arts and computer-science students, as well as developing his own projects.

Dragulescu credits his mentor, Sheldon Brown, a visual-arts professor who heads CRCA, with impressing upon him the power and importance of games, which are only now being taken seriously as a sub-

ject for academic study.

In several projects, Dragulescu explores such topics as politics and war through the prism of popular games.

"Havoc" (which has been exhibited by galleries in print form) and "Blogbot" borrow elements from the game franchises Quake and Civilization; the latter project juxtaposes images of battling armies with text culled randomly in real time from blogs written by a U.S. soldier and an Iraqi in the war zone.

Dragulescu grew up in Romania — he still remembers standing in line for butter and

milk during the communist era — and while he tries not to take sides politically in his art, those early experiences affect how he interprets the friction between cultures and nations.

"Coming from a small country like Romania," as he puts it, "it's interesting to see how the superpowers have influenced (others)."

While still in high school, Dragulescu worked for an independent TV station in post-communist Romania. He moved to update New York in the 1990s, earning a degree in film at Ithaca College, then bouncing around Silicon Valley

during the dot-com boom (and bust) before coming to UCSD. He earned his master's in June.

Despite the Game Lab suits, Dragulescu's art is digital. He is also a painter.

"But it's interesting that I can express so much more through computer code," says. "You can create more complex things, but different data sources. I think that's another tool in art."

James Hebert: (619) 293-3333
jim.hebert@uniontrib.com

Alex Dragulescu gazes from a projected image of "Havoc," one of his digital creations. UCSD's Experimental Game Lab. Dragulescu's art incorporates video-game imagery, from blogs to even space. Nadia Borovik Scott / Union-Tribune

Avoid the Mall Madness