SCREEN OF DEATH

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The technology we use to work and study, to engage with social media and to consume entertainment appear as shiny, pure and clean. Smooth parts made of glass and aluminium, plated with chrome, feel and look good. But do they actively try to make us forget where they really come from? 'Designed in California', 'Assembled in China'... but mined where and at what expense?

To be honest, I think many of us are at least on some level aware of places like Baotou, where not far away from the city centre there is a huge toxic lake, result of all the waste generated by the mining of rare earth minerals. Those exact minerals will be then later found from our pockets and desks in the form of phones and computers [1].

Environmental disasters are not the only result of the upkeep and development of our digital media infrastructure. Human casualties are not separate from this either. Mining rare earth minerals can quite often mean unsafe working conditions and the use of child labour. The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is known for its reserves of cobalt, an essential material for e.g. lithium-ion batteries used in a wide variety of devices like phones and electric vehicles. DRC produces over 60 percent of all the cobalt used around the world [2]. And it is no surprise that not all of that is mined under safe conditions and without child labour. So while humanity tackles climate change by replacing diesel and petrol cars with electric ones, we should not forget who might be on the other end of the whole production chain. And as I mentioned earlier, it is not just electric vehicles, but a huge part of our global digital media infrastructure that might have a child working on the bottom of the chain[2].

Raphael was one of these children. I read about his story from Siddharth Kara's article in The Guardian. Kara is an author and researcher who covers the topics of modern slavery and child labour. Raphael was born in DRC, orphaned as a baby and raised by his mother's sister. When he was 12 years old, the family didn't have any more money to keep Raphael in school, so he had to start working. Apparently that is what most kids in the village had to do – to work at a cobalt mine. He worked as a surface digger until he turned 15 and was strong enough to start digging tunnels. Two years later a group of 30 diggers, including Raphael, were deep underground when the tunnel collapsed. None of them survived [2].

This digital media infrastructure we nowadays consider to be essential for everyone all around the world is in fact a privilege. And quite often the ones who make its existence possible in the bottom of the chain by mining and doing other physical tasks are not part of the infrastructure at all as users. Sean Cubitt (2016) examines this inequity of digital media well in "Ecologies of Fabrication." As a starting point, he addresses one the core questions around the topic:

"...whether the number and scale of media technologies that we use in the developed countries can be expanded to the rest of the world, and whether that expansion can be sustained. The development perspective places greater demands on tactics of sustainable design because it asks whether there are enough materials and energy available in the finite system of the planet to provide them, in the forms we are now familiar with in the wealthy world, to the tree billion people still living beyond the range of our most fundamental technologies." [3]
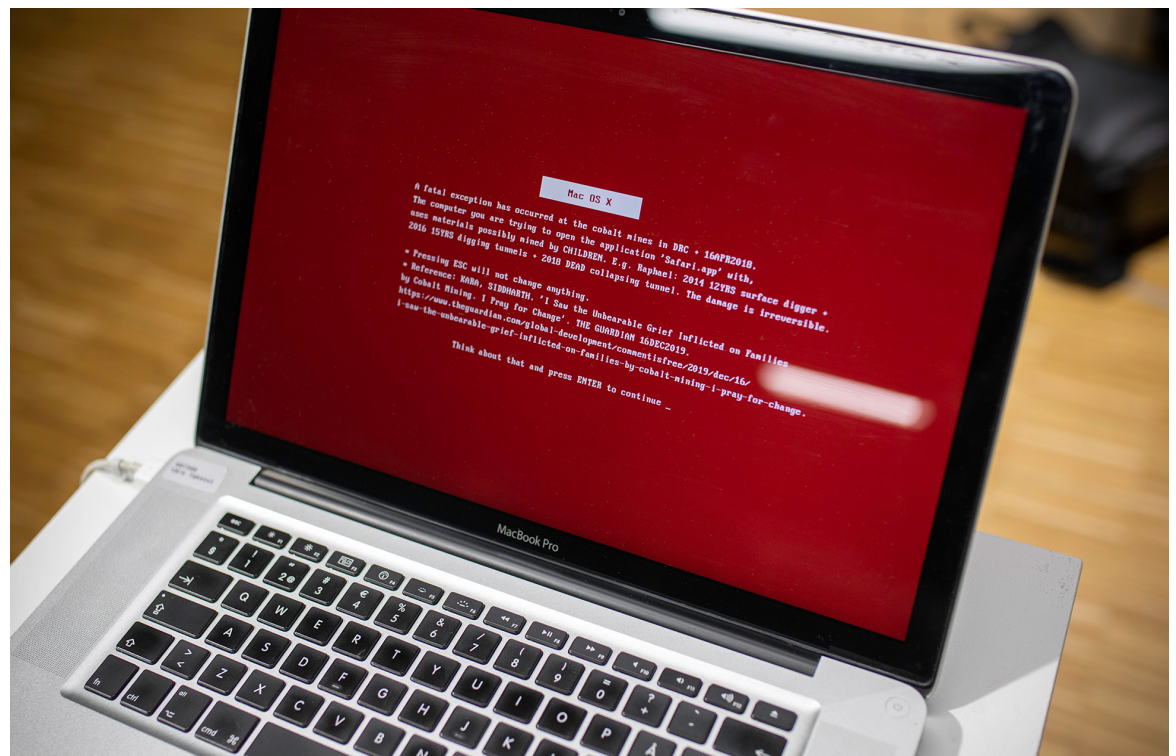

Figure 1.2 Installation

How long can a system that is built on top of abuse and inequity last? We are aware of these issues. We read about them on the screens of our devices that are composed of the materials Raphael and many others have lost their lives over. But still, they seem somewhat distant. How could these issues be made visible? In what ways we could present these dilemmas as well as provoke a confrontation with the ethics of digital labor and mining?

I developed the concept of a computer virus that would first shock the user personally by duping them into believing their computer is at fault. Screen of Death is a Safari web-browser launcher that replaces the user's original Safari in the dock. When the user opens the browser they unwittingly deploy the non-harmful Screen of Death. The launcher pops open a red panic screen that mimics the widely familiar aesthetics of the legendary "blue screen of death" [4]. But when reading through the text on the screen the user notices the fatal error has not occurred inside the computer but at a cobalt mine in DRC. Through this I hope to raise the question "Which is worse?". The user can then exit the Screen of Death by pressing the enter key and the real Safari web-browser will open with Siddharth Kara's article "I Saw the Unbearable Grief Inflicted on Families by Cobalt Mining. I Pray for Change".

In "The Anthrobscene" Jussi Parikka (2015) wants us to rethink the idea of the anthropocene. As he says: "The addition of the obscene is self-explanatory when one starts to consider the unsustainable, politically dubious, and ethically suspicious practices that maintain technological culture and its corporate networks." "To call it "anthrobscene" is just to emphasize what we knew but perhaps shied away from acting on: a horrific human-caused drive toward a sixth mass extinction of species." [5] And, like the examples presented earlier in this text show, the obscenity seems to have no borders. It is the entire planet and all life that depends on it that are affected. The Anthrobscene is an epoch where our crumbling morals drag down everything else with them.

Notes

1. Maughan, Tim. "The dystopian lake filled by the world's tech lust" BBC. April 2, 2015. https:// www.bbc.com/future/article/20150402-the-worst-place-on-earth. Accessed December 1, 2020.
2. Kara, Siddharth. "I saw the unbearable grief inflicted on families by cobalt mining. I pray for change" The Guardian. December 16, 2019. https://www. theguardian.com/global- development/commentisfree/2019/dec/16/i-saw-the-unbearable-grief-inflicted-on-families- by- cobalt-mining-i-pray-for-change. Accessed December 1, 2020.
3. Cubitt, Sean. "Ecologies of Fabrication." In: Nicole Starosielski and Janet Walker,
 eds. Sustainable Media. New York, NY: Routledge, pp. 163–179 (2016).
4. Meaney, Evan. "Sympathy for the Blue Screen of Death" The Atlantic. December 6, 2013. https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2013/12/sympathy-for-the-blue-screen-of- death/282015/ Accessed December 8, 2020.
5. Parikka, Jussi. The Anthrobscene. University of Minnesota Press, 2015.