ESSAY

An 8-bit, tender refrain.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

The awakening of a virtual creature. Feigning emotional states through its characterised hardware, the amorphic toy implored its user to treat it as sentient:

'As soon as Tamagotchi hatches, it will beep at you for attention.. In order to start Tamagotchi on a good growth path, you must take good care of Tamagotchi right from the start' read the device's original paper instructions.

Nestled in school uniform pockets and tiny palms, Tamagotchi, released by Bandai in 1998, didn't just succeed commercially. It had earned the coveted attachment usually reserved for real friendships and pets. Threatening to die unless users attended to its every need, the gadget stands not just as one of the best-selling toys of all time, but a marker for the kind of 'affective transference and intimacy'[1] firmly rooted in today's digital landscape.

The Tamagotchi's half analogue, half update-centric interface places it on a brink between physical and new media. Stepping into **INTERNET CAFE,** a visitor journeys back to this very precipice: a fever dream of the early millennium. Rendered in playful iconography, holographic shades and synthetic textures, seventeen artists invite us to reconsider these design languages in retrospect, looking at the very concepts they contain.

The mood of the late-1990s and early-2000s was generally characterised by techno-optimism. Computer scientist Nicholas Negroponte's seminal *Being Digital* would come to predict a number of ideas with striking accuracy, including personalised feeds and digital assistants. Above all, Negroponte believed that the digital could surpass all boundaries and obstacles: 'It has four very powerful qualities that will result in its ultimate triumph: decentralising, globalising, harmonising and empowering'.[2] More wary of its end, but declaring its unique influence, Sociologist Sherry Turkle argued that the computer was not just a tool or extension of our world, but a 'second self'[3]. This unbridled sense of potential during the decade was naturally reflected in the product design of computers.

Eva Dixon's *'Throttle'* is a honey-coloured, translucent tableau of screws, brackets and ephemera, alluding to both machine circuitry and our lived, architectural environments. With its polycarbonate panelling and stretcher bars covered in insulation tape, the structure conveys a sense of how things work as being integral to their design. It recalls the casing of Apple's 'clamshell' iBook or the iMac G3, released in fun, semi-translucent colours like 'key lime' and 'flower power'. The literal visibility of the inner workings of these products frame technology as playful: our friends, rather than foes.

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[1] Stephen Monteiro, *Needy Media*: *How Tech Gets Personal* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2025) p.171
[2] Nicholas Negroponte, *Being Digital*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995) pp.28-20
[3] Sherry Turkle, "Always-on/Always-On-You: The Tethered Self" in *Hand-book of Mobile Communication Studies*, ed. James E. Katz (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008)

Meanwhile, **Judy Maxwell-McNicol's** sculpture as gravestone recreates a desktop PC — so often more 'shared' than personal. Remembering her innocent, inquisitive searches for 'girls kissing' on Youtube and Yahoo as a teen, Mccoll makes light of the nuclear family context in which we used computers. The artist's devastatingly humorous inscription — *Rest in Peace My Heterosexuality* — acknowledges that these formative experiences took place somewhere between the digital and physical realm: both in cyberspace and the cushioned comfort of a 'computer room'.

Whilst techno-optimism may have dominated the early 2000s, the 2008 financial crisis put an abrupt end to the wishes many had for the millennium. Artists in **INTERNET CAFE** reflect this latent skepticism in different ways. **Eliot Fox's** '***FREE ENERGY 4 U*** ' emulates an infinite, costless generator shown in a wave of pseudoscientific tutorials on Youtube. The viral popularity of such videos points towards a climate wherein Negroponte's hope for a decentralised internet instead reinforces capitalism through facetious 'clickbait'. Knowledge becomes an 'informational commodity'[4], valued for its production above truth.

Rather than creating a singular environment, **INTERNET CAFE** draws on artists' shared cultural memory alongside more personal forms of world-building. **Sam King's** aquatic 'Frutiger Aero'-inspired palette is juxtaposed with **Charlie Chesterman's** eerily fluorescent tones. Both gesture towards a glitching, surreal past — perhaps too saccharine to be true, like the Lovehearts seen in ***Sugar Lips.***

Looking around the exhibition, it is notable how many artists work within traditional mediums and surface decorative techniques. These examples show how art, craft and technology can converge, rather than conflict. **Faye Rita Robinson** takes her most cherished childhood toys (a knock-off Tamagotchi, *Ant City*, VHS tapes) enshrining them as delicate ceramic pieces. In **Max King's** work, physical media is directly incorporated into the digital. King's animated prints are inspired by low-cost, LCD games, depicting recurring cowboy figures from his oeuvre, rather than franchise characters common in the originals. The level of detail afforded to these works, transposed onto what were once low-resolution toys, speaks to a wider reappropriation and elevation of analogue art. From custom frame to backlit image, the series literally and metaphorically illuminates our way of viewing printed media.

It is no secret that our age practices a hauntological engagement with the last few decades. In fashion, art and popular culture, revivalist trends might feel perpetual. **INTERNET CAFE** leverages this widespread nostalgia, even furnishing it into a shrine, to finally ask — what is it we're really grieving?

Anna Moss

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[4] Jean-Francois Lyotard, 'The Postmodern Condition', in *Theory and History of Literature*, Volume 10. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983) p.5