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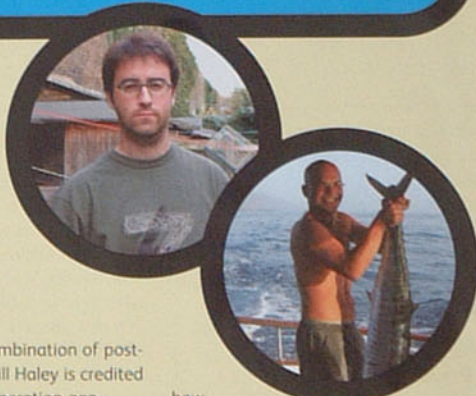
How lo-fi revolutionised hi-tech

Plus: Hector Serrano and Victor Vinā profiled; What the Design Council should do; The Blueprint Sessions shortlist



NET GAINS

Hector Serrano and Victor Vinā have set about simplifying technology with a new exhibition, netObjects. Grant Gibson catches up with them



Traditionally, the combination of post-war optimism and Bill Haley is credited with creating the generation gap. Since then it has tended to be music, along with its accompanying fashions, that have defined an era. Whether it was Elvis's hips swaying, the Beatles' haircuts, the Sex Pistols swearing on the Bill Grundy show, or the emergence of dance and the explosion of illegal, E-fuelled raves, music has been the medium of youth.

However, as the original rock 'n' roll generation has moved into its dotage, this is no longer the case. What was once shocking has now become commonplace – Bob Geldof swore on CD:UK, the Saturday morning music show recently, and hardly an eyebrow was raised – Cat Deeley just laughed it off and moved on. Robbie Williams talks openly about his drug problem; your mother swoons and wants to give him a big cuddle. Meanwhile, hip bands such as The Strokes are Radio 2 staples, and give CDs away free with the Sunday newspapers.

So what differentiates the generations now? Well, the way you use your mobile phone, the agility of your thumbs as you text, the number of hours you spend on the internet – in other words, age is now defined by technology: how much you have and

how often you use it. The result is that, slowly but surely, a techno-underclass is emerging. Believe it or not, there are people out there whose only use for a mobile is as a telephone, and keep their numbers in a little black book rather than a palmtop. It's this strata of society that designers Hector Serrano and Victor Vinā hope to address with their latest exhibition of products, netObjects.

At a time when companies appear obsessed with multifunctionality, netObjects is a beguilingly straightforward idea. Dealing with an assortment of topics such as sex, finding a partner, money and gossip, take eight everyday objects, connect them to the internet using wireless networks, then only give each object one very simple and specific function.

So, for example, a cuckoo clock gives you the news headlines every 15 minutes; an umbrella lets you know the weather forecast for your city and a football rattles and hums every time your team scores a goal. It's about highly edited information in forms that are easily recognisable and simple to use. As Vinā explains: "One

netGossip, by Hector Serrano and Victor Vinā; inset, right, Hector Serrano, and far right, Victor Vinā



of the major elements of the project was that we didn't want to keep adding more and more functions, then the object becomes meaningless – there's no emotional response to something that does everything."

Vinā and Serrano first met when they were studying on the same industrial design course at the ESDI CEU of Valencia, in Spain. After that, their interests diverged, if not necessarily their location. Serrano – who came to prominence after he won the Oxo Peugeot Award in 2000 with his Superpatata Light – did an MA on the design products course at the Royal College of Art, while Vinā followed him a year later, but opted for computer-related design. And appropriately, it's in the cafe of the RCA that I caught up with them.

While they contrast physically – Serrano, bearded with a mop of thick dark hair, Vinā, balding with a day or two's stubble – they share a quiet intensity. Questions are thought about and answered seriously in the machine-gun style of English that the Spanish so often employ. Vinā, who originally asked Serrano to help him with the project, is about to disappear to the Canary Islands for a year, but there's scant sign that he's in the holiday mood. What he is more than willing to talk about though, is his work.

"For the past two years I was researching at the interactive design institute in Ivrea," he says. "Basically, what I did there was to develop a system to connect objects to the web. It was really abstract – I didn't really design the objects. Instead, they were

more like cardboard boxes." And that is where Serrano came in. As Vinā explains: "Hector could provide the communication to the project... It was a case of taking Hector's approach from product design and my approach from interactive design, and combining the two to see what we could come up with." Serrano is happy to confirm this: "He came up to me and said: 'I want to do something that everyone can understand.'"

The result is one of the best design exhibitions I've seen in a very long time. A combination of the academic leanings of Vinā, who freely admits he's "not really aiming to reach bigger audiences. For me it's much more about exploring new territory", and the more practical, harder-nosed approach of Serrano, netObjects manages to be

surprising yet realistic. You may not have seen anything quite like the products on display, but if Habitat started stocking them tomorrow, they wouldn't look out of place.

The sense that each of these products could find a market is reinforced by the fictional characters the pair has created for them. On a TV screen playing at the show, we learn that a typical user of the globe that relays the swings and roundabouts of the stock market is a hyperactive city lad, and that the glass which whispers all the latest gossip is perfect for a nosy neighbour. "From the very beginning we were always thinking of eight characters," explains Vinā. "They represent a typical user – not necessarily the typical user of the internet, but really trying to cover the





whole culture and the whole content of the web. They give the objects some personality, and help to tell the story in a much simpler way." The idea works brilliantly well, bringing another layer of emotion and reality to the products. And, visitors to the exhibition are not required to plough through reams of text to work out how each product functions.

Ultimately though, the question for netObjects is: are these ideas truly commercially viable? Will we one day see them sitting in the hi-tech section of IKEA, or is the whole thing simply an exercise in what is theoretically possible? It seems this is a point neither Serrano nor Vinã are absolutely certain of themselves: "Obviously, on a commercial basis they're not real," confirms Serrano. "In a way they could be sold more as a one-off piece than a mass production thing." "But they are real," counters Vinã, perhaps grasping the financial possibilities. "If there was an interest and a big company wanted to manufacture them, I'm sure they could be made in a cheap way. They're using technology that has been around for a long time."

The two men do agree that the entire process has been a learning experience. Although initially coming from similar backgrounds, they discovered their working methods and

expectations varied wildly. "I need to know exactly how everything is working and I need to be able to touch it," explains the product designer Serrano. "And sometimes I'd get annoyed because I didn't exactly understand what was going to happen. There was very little design work in terms of forms. It was more like changing the brain of the object itself."

On the flip side, the interactive designer Vinã had his own problems to grapple with. He confesses: "For me the design process is usually the other way around. I design the structure and the content, then behaviour emerges over time. And sometimes you don't even know how it's going to feel until you finish it. No one's able to predict with interactive technology. You have to try it out and change it - you'd never say this is the way it's going to feel at the start." Both believe that it was this difference in style that provided the catalyst for new ideas, as Vinã says: "It's very common, isn't it, when you cross borders? When you're at the border of different disciplines, that is where innovation happens."

What happens next is unclear. NetObjects will continue to tour the world - at the time of writing it was leaving London to go to Madrid, and hopefully will find a home in Milan later in the year. Serrano is working on a new lighting project for a Spanish manufacturer, while Vinã has his bag slung over his shoulder to disappear to the Canaries. "I think we're fed up with each other," says Serrano jokingly. Let's hope they aren't, as it would be a shame if the thinking behind netObjects was allowed to wither on the vine. **B**

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THE OBJECTS OF OUR AFFECTION

netPeep

A book that broadcasts thousands of live shows of delicious, vivacious girls for your viewing pleasure.
 Connection: wi-fi video
 Encoded: mpeg-4
 Bandwidth: 90 kb/sec
 Source: <http://www.247live.com>
 Materials: paper
 Dimensions: 12cm x 20cm x 6cm
 Components: lcd flat display

netFlirt

A beautiful storage box that prints your personal contact ads just for you. Ideal for men and women, er, seeking men and women.
 Connection: ethernet
 Bandwidth: 5kb/min
 Source: <http://www.singlesonline.com>
 Materials: beech, silk, PP
 Dimensions: 30cm x 20cm x 20cm
 Components: 24 char/line matrix printer

netGoal

A miniature football that alerts you and plays back goals scored by or against your team.
 Connection: bluetooth
 Bandwidth: max 20 KB/sec
 Source: <http://www.sportnetwork.net>
 Materials: leather, acrylic
 Dimensions: 15cm x 15cm x 40cm
 Components: step motor, speaker

netUmbrella

This ingenious device enables you to check out the weather forecast for your city.
 Connection: bluetooth
 Bandwidth: 2 KB/min
 Source: <http://www.weather-online.com>
 Materials: acrylic, steel, beech
 Dimensions: 12cm x 3cm x 60cm
 Components: 16 x 4 char led display units



netCuckoo

A clock that delivers news headlines every 15 minutes. It has a selector for either The Sun or The Guardian, and can be

activated by pulling the switch.
 Connection: ethernet
 Bandwidth: 5 KB/min
 Source: L <http://www.guardian.co.uk>
 R <http://www.thesun.co.uk>
 Materials: beech, birch, PS
 Dimensions: 30cm x 30cm x 45cm
 Components: 20x2 lcd display

netFuture

Rub the crystal ball and it will read your palms, forecasting your future future on its integrated screen. Enter your date of birth for greater accuracy.
 Connection: usb
 Bandwidth: max 12 kb/min
 Source: <http://www.astrology.com>
 Materials: beech, brass, glass
 Dimensions: 13cm x 13cm x 20cm
 Components: 16x16 led matrix

netGlobe

Gives the user real-time stock market quotes on your desk.
 Connection: bluetooth
 Bandwidth: 2 kb/min
 Materials: PU, aluminium
 Dimensions: 40cm x 40cm x 50cm
 Components: 16x4 digit display units

netGossip

Will keep you posted on all the latest gossip and scandal.
 Connection: audio Bluetooth
 Bandwidth: 20 KB/sec
 Source: <http://www.hellomagazine.com>
 Materials: glass
 Dimensions: 8cm x 8cm x 12cm
 Components: speaker, receiver

Facing page, clockwise from top, the finished products by Serrano and Vinã: netUmbrella, netGoal, netFlirt and netPeep. This page, top, netFuture; top right, the preparation drawing for netCuckoo