

HYPER-CULTURE

by Jaime Woo

Earlier this summer, a friend and I went for a stroll along Queen Street West after meeting for dinner. We found our way to Chapters, where we browsed through magazines and journals. I got distracted leafing through a leather-bound journal when I heard the sounds of ocean waves softly crashing against the shore.

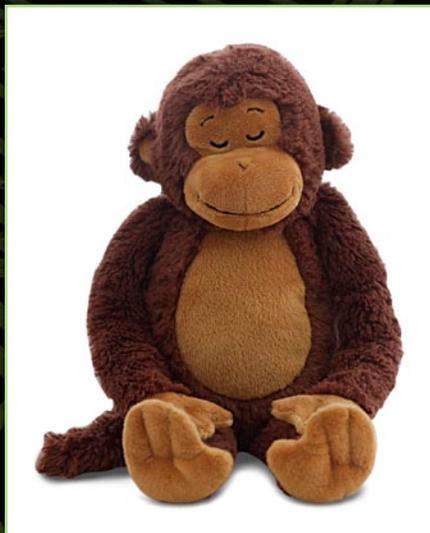
We followed the sounds into the baby section of the store, where we discovered a plush monkey as its source. Apparently the animal was used to help babies sleep better, with the option of four sounds: a mother's heartbeat, rainfall, whale cries, and the ocean waves that had acted as our siren song.

Nearby was also a plush lamb, but it was at regular price, while the monkey was on sale. When I asked a passing salesperson, he noted the "Cloud b" lamb was a more popular item and never went on sale. A sleeping machine at \$20 was a steal, but double that was too steep, even in the face of something as adorable as a lamb.

The salesperson tried to be helpful by asking if it were a boy or a girl—which, upon reflection, is a silly question: how are monkeys and lambs gender-coded? I took him by surprise by announcing that it was for me. I thought it was playful and worth a try for my insomnia, without having to commit to one of those awfully serious-looking sleep machines I always see in Brookstone shops.

As I biked my rainfall-playing plush monkey home, I started to think about how technology and restfulness come together.

The previous year at the Game Developer Conference, I had attended the Experimental Gameplay Session, where developers share abstract, unconventional ideas for games. One game that stood out in my mind was Mantra, a game developed by Argentinean developer Agustin Perez Fernandez that investigated meditation. Certainly, people get accused of getting into trances while immersed in a great game, but could a digital game



actually help with meditation?

In Mantra, the player must focus on a rotating bar and move a joystick in a corresponding motion. As the player gets better at matching the action on screen, the game throws obstacles on-screen as a distraction. The idea is that focused, meditative players will be able to filter out distractions to successfully match the motion.

I'm not sure we'll likely see a commercial version of the game anytime soon, but it does bring up the idea of how we can accomplish computer-mediated meditation. After all, we can't all have access to spiritual coaches, but a virtual version may be as helpful. I turned to the Apple App Store to see what might help in an attempt for a more mindful life.

I downloaded Simply Being, a guided meditation app, developed by Richard and Mary Maddux, who are behind the Meditation Oasis podcast. Having never heard the podcast before, I was curious (and a little skeptical) about Simply Being. I sat on my couch and closed my eyes. The narration was helpful without being intrusive or indulgent, and the brief reprieve from having to analyze, label, or evaluate life was a welcome one, especially being a writer. I took long, deep breaths, and before I knew it the first five minute session was done.

Earlier in the day, I had downloaded Pranayama, a free app to help with my breathing. The app is relatively simple, providing visual guidance on how to pace yogic breathing, through the nose focusing on the back on the throat. What felt simple in the



beginning increased in difficulty as I hit the third minute of sustained, rhythmic breathing. By the end of the first session, a total of seven minutes, I felt heady, with a minor dip in tension. I could see how daily practice would introduce more calmness into my life; in addition, proponents of yogic breathing have suggested benefits such as helping with posture, boosting our immune system, and raising metabolism.

Finally, I downloaded the free Relax Melodies app, which supplied 44 sounds to help aid concentration or provide relaxation. The noises ranged from expected ones like waterfalls and bird chirping to the more niche sounds of a vacuum cleaner, a medieval fair, and a cat purring—which could incidentally also double as “cat farting.” What’s fun about this app is the ability to play with our soundscapes and experiment with how we behave immersed in different sonic environments. The app even allows a layering of sounds, so if you ever wondered what vacuuming at a medieval fair held near a waterfall sounded like, you’re in luck!

I could see myself using the Relax Melodies as an alternative to music while I’m deep in writing. I already know I need repetitive sounds to write best—I tend to play one song over and over again until a piece is done—and it’s nice to have sounds without vocals. I could also see use for the app while in transit and needing a way to block out outside noise, perhaps while doing breathing exercises.

The one place I won’t be using the app, however, is in bed. For that, I’m still stuck on my plush monkey.



At a time when things are so disposable or prone to become obsolete, how do we balance experiencing what’s new while being respectful of the planet? Maybe the solution is ensuring we discover the full value of the things we love.

