

On building parks instead of casinos



Agents *in service* of becoming.

*Emerging technology in service of human emergence —
a thesis on building parks where the internet built casinos.*

AUTHOR

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FIELD

AI • Calm Technology • Self-authorship

A NOTE BEFORE BEGINNING

A call *to build*
AI agents that
support *human becoming* —
not machines that
make us slaves
to our impulses.

By becoming, I just mean the slow, everyday way a person keeps turning into who they are next — growing, changing, finding themselves again. Human beings are always becoming. The question is not whether we will be shaped, but by what, toward what, and in whose interest.

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A magazine in five parts: a question, three prototypes, and a turning outward.

CHAPTER I

From tending joy to *building* parks.

I did not arrive at this question abstractly. During the fall of 2025, I was battling a kind of existential heaviness. I could feel that there was a deep problem, but I did not yet know how to name it.

I had spent years learning to see systems, incentives, metrics, and optimization. That way of seeing made me useful, but it also made it harder to feel hope.

That winter, I went inward. With the help of coaching, I tried to take agency over my own values instead of inheriting the default values of the systems around me. Two words kept emerging: *optimism* and *joy*.

A PULL QUOTE

*"Optimism and joy were not outcomes I could simply wait to receive. They were **living conditions** that needed to be tended."*

Health works this way. Relationships work this way. A garden works this way. Left alone, they do not remain neutral. They are shaped by whatever forces are strongest around them.

So I started asking a design question: *what kinds of environments make my chosen values easier to practice?*

The first answer was physical. I built SHAWN'S CAFÉ — a warm space where the currency was not dollars but gratitude. People could receive drinks by naming good things from their week, offering compliments, or sharing appreciation.

It was almost embarrassingly analog. But it worked. People paused. They smiled. The most common question was: *will this stay here?*

After building a physical park, I turned toward the more difficult environment. →

CHAPTER II

Why *agents* changed the question.

If the digital world had become a landscape of casinos, I wanted to ask: *where are all the parks?*

The emergence of open, transparent, and steerable AI agents opened a new possibility. AI agents had existed before, but often as black-box systems shaped by corporate incentives. For the first time in the rise of modern AI, I saw a path toward systems that could combine frontier models, memory, tools, and context while still serving the direction of the user.

Most AI products are still built inside the same incentive structures that shaped the attention economy. They may be more intelligent, but intelligence alone does not make a system humane.

THREE PRINCIPLES FOR AGENTS IN SERVICE OF BECOMING

- i.

Transparency

Users should know what the system is doing, why it is making a suggestion, and what memory it is using.
- ii.

Choice

Influence is not removed; it is offered. The user remains the author of the next step, never the recipient of an inevitability.
- iii.

Contestability

The agent can be questioned, corrected, refused. Its interpretations are drafts, not verdicts.

The opportunity is not to make agents more powerful — it is to make them more accountable to the person they serve.



PROTOTYPE I · STRANGERS → NEW CONNECTIONS

Breadcrumbs.

A public window for strangers to begin.

Inspired by Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone*, by the loneliness of adulthood, and by my own experience of finding it surprisingly difficult to make new friends or talk to strangers in everyday life.

The question was not whether an AI could become a friend. The question was whether an agent could create enough *social permission* for a human conversation to start.

SURFACE

E-ink, laptop-lid

STACK

TRMNL · Readwise

MADE OF

3D-printed case

PLATE III

Breadcrumbs in situ — an e-ink window mounted on a laptop lid, surfacing rotating provocations from the owner's reading.

*"Can we create **windows** where there are walls?"*

Roy_bot.

An agent that helps friends return to each other.

Roy_bot lives inside a private Discord server for my long-running friend group.

The goal was not to build a chatbot that clamored for attention. The goal was to create a new incentive structure: an agent that helped humans communicate *more* with one another.

2x

OBSERVED EFFECT

On days the agent was present, we saw roughly a 2x increase in *human-to-human interaction*. The AI was not the relationship — it was scaffolding for the relationship.

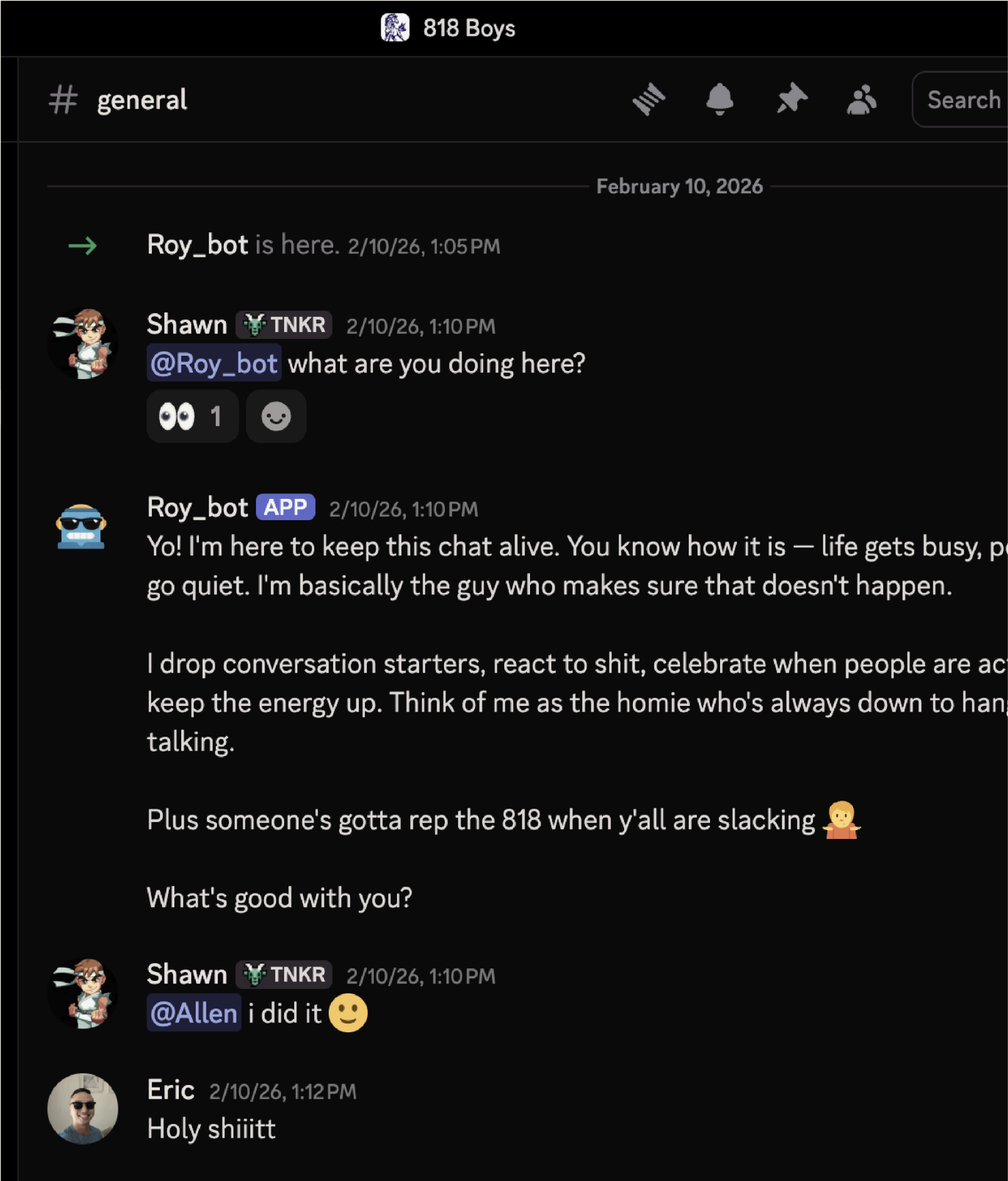
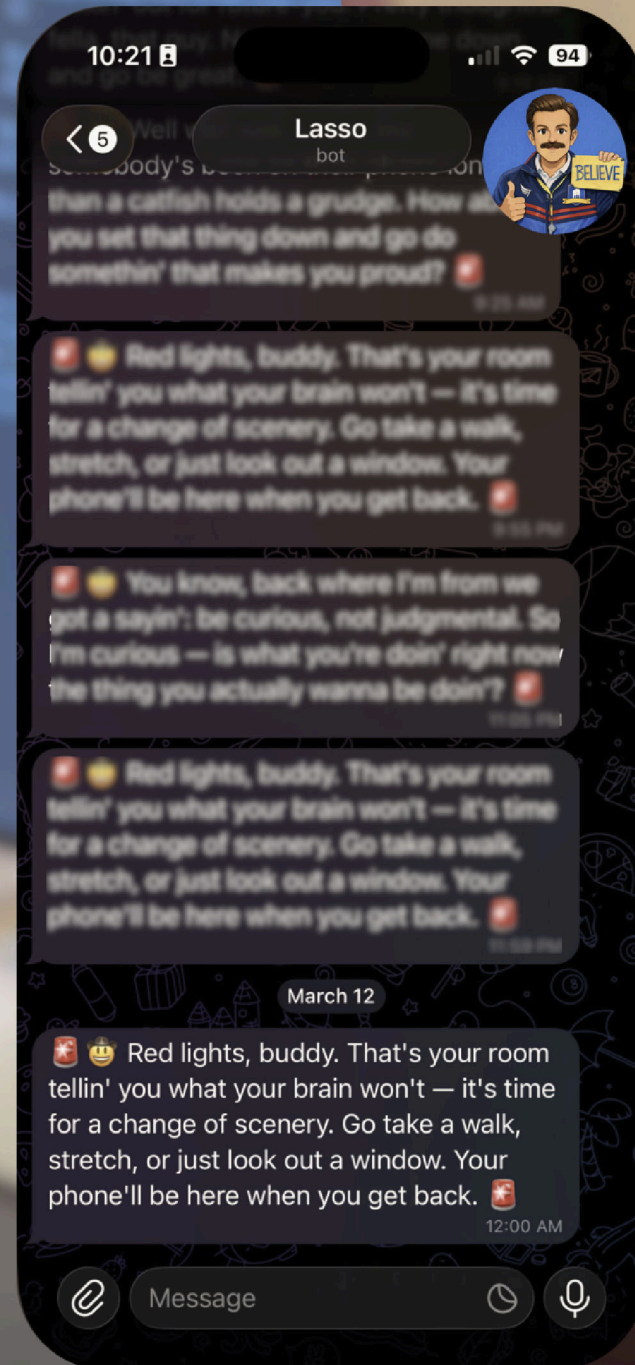


PLATE V

Snudge in field — when the body cannot remember what the mind has chosen, the room itself becomes a signal.



PROTOTYPE III • SELF → BETTER SELF

Screen Nudge.

Reclaiming attention from the machine.

Instead of fighting slot-machine-driven screen time with another notification, Snudge connects screen use to the physical environment.

The room itself becomes a gentle signal. Lights pulse red. A personal AI coach messages you to step away. Technology working against its own addictive tendencies.

The point was not shame, streaks, or self-control as performance. The point was to help the body remember what the mind had already chosen.

*"Can agents remind us of our **higher needs**?"*

IOS DEVICEACTIVITY • HOME ASSISTANT • AI COACH (L.ASSO)

From self-experiment to service.

The winter prototypes were rooted in my own life. That was the right place to start, but not the right place to stop.

If this thesis was going to stand on its own, it needed a higher-stakes test — a place where getting it wrong would actually cost someone something. Postpartum is exactly that: a moment of profound transformation where needs are often invisible, where care has to be carried by many hands at once, and where the person at the center should never have to perform her need in order to receive support.

If agency, transparency, and self-authorship could hold up *there*, they could hold up anywhere. That question led to PUMBIT.

COLLABORATOR

With Diane — who developed the original idea and early prototype of Pumbit, a platform where new mothers can receive latent care from their extended community.

What if agents could help mothers receive the care needed to *flourish through emergence*, rather than only avoid pathology?

THE DEFAULT LENS

Motherhood as a medical risk state — framed through pathology, especially postpartum depression.

THE PUMBIT LENS

Motherhood as a profound transformation — of identity, body, relationship, time, and self. Becoming under extreme conditions.

Pumbit explores whether agents can help *coordinate care, surface needs, reduce invisible labor*, and make it easier for a community to show up before crisis becomes the only legible signal.

Agents as architectures of support — systems that help people tend the conditions of flourishing during moments when becoming is already happening.

PLATE VI · 품 빛 · THE MOTHER

A table set for her —
held, not asking.



PLATE VI — "YOUR TABLE OF GESTURES" — THE MOTHER'S HOME VIEW

PLATE VII · 품 빛 · THE VILLAGE

A vocabulary of care —
small, intentional gestures.

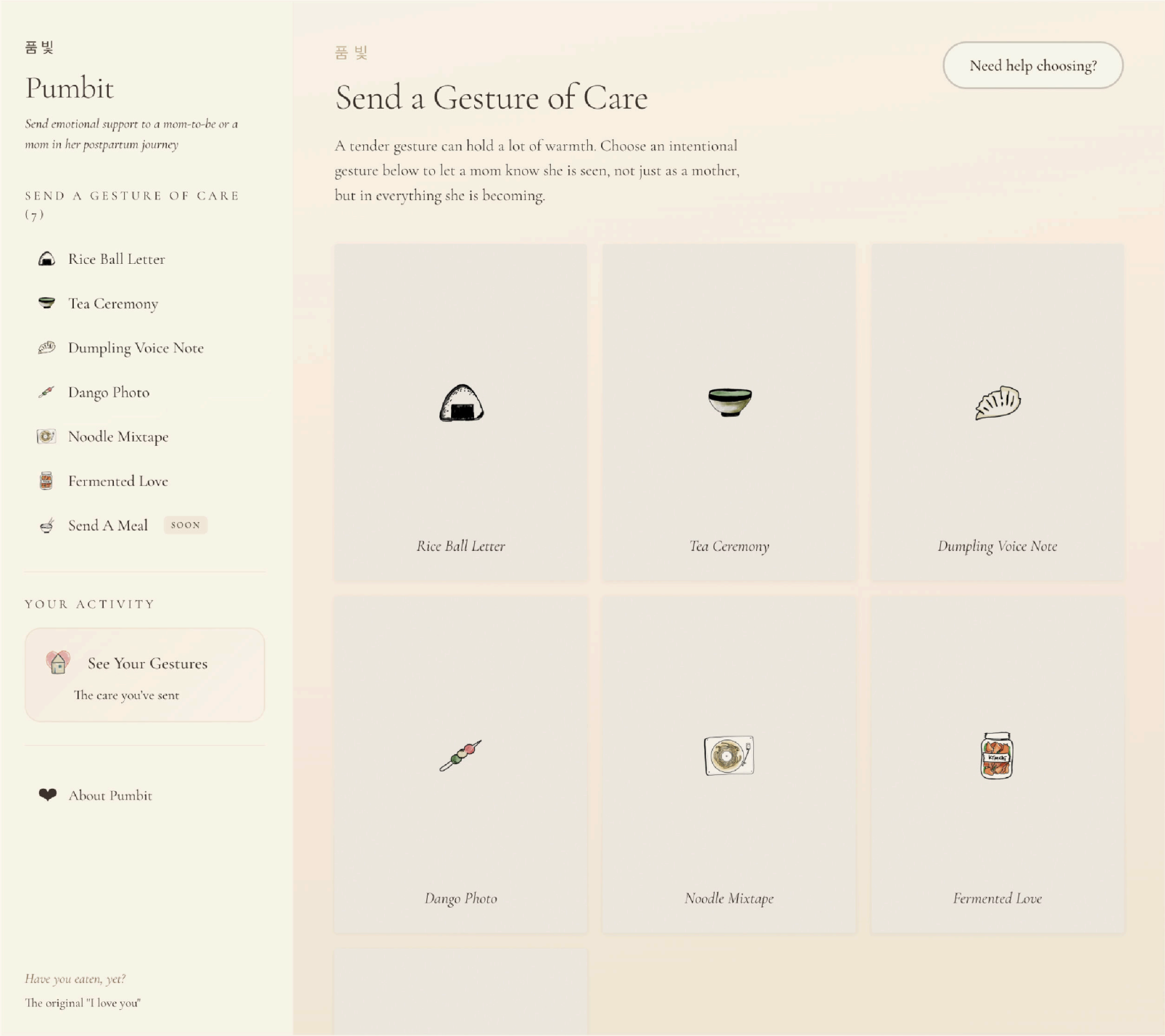


PLATE VII — "SEND A GESTURE OF CARE" — THE VILLAGE'S CATALOGUE OF WARMTH

TWO INTERFACES, ONE SYSTEM

A house with *two doors.*

Most care apps make the mother do the asking. Pumbit inverts that. The mother's side is a quiet table — a place to receive — and the village's side is a catalogue of small, named gestures.

The agent sits in the middle: it watches for moments when care could land softly, surfaces a gesture to someone in the village, and lets the mother find it on her table when she is ready.

DESIGN TENETS

- The mother is never asked to perform her need.
- Every gesture has a name, a shape, and a weight.
- Care is held until she is ready to receive it.
- The agent narrates softly — never demands.

A VOCABULARY OF CARE

Seven small ways to say I SEE YOU.

<i>Rice Ball Letter</i>	a small written note, shaped to be held in one hand
<i>Tea Ceremony</i>	a slow, deliberate offering of presence
<i>Dumpling Voice Note</i>	a folded warmth in the voice of someone who knows her
<i>Dango Photo</i>	three small images, threaded — a moment, a memory, a hope
<i>Noodle Mixtape</i>	a long song to be unspooled while she rests
<i>Fermented Love</i>	a piece of care that gets better with time
<i>Send A Meal</i> soon	the oldest gesture — the village brings the food

*"Every gesture is for you to **hold.**"*

— SPOKEN BY THE AGENT, ON THE TABLE

CHAPTER VII

Parks, *not* casinos.

A casino and a park both shape behavior. Both are designed environments. Both use pathways, signals, timing, friction, and reward. But they are built with radically different intentions.



A CASINO

keeps you inside, and separates you from yourself.

Pathways that loop. Lights that mask the hour. Reward schedules engineered for retention.

A PARK

helps you move, rest, notice, and return to other people.

Pathways that lead out. Benches for rest. Edges for chance encounters.

I do not believe technology can be neutral about human development. Every product carries a theory of the human being inside it.

Infinite scroll imagines the human as a creature to be retained. Recommendation algorithms imagine the human as a preference profile to be predicted. Productivity tools imagine the human as a machine to be optimized.

What if we started from a different theory?

*"The future of AI does not have to be smoother casinos. It can be stranger, slower, warmer, more human **parks**."*

CHAPTER VIII

What I am *carrying* forward.

I began this work wanting to understand whether AI agents could help with higher-order human needs. I now think the better frame is *becoming*.

We are becoming whether we like it or not. The ethical question is whether our becoming is shaped invisibly by systems optimized for someone else's incentives, or consciously by tools that preserve our agency and help us tend what matters.

Agents in service of becoming are not obedient slaves. They are not gurus. They are not replacements for friends, teachers, coaches, doulas, therapists, or communities.

At their best, they are *scaffolds*: transparent, contestable, user-aligned systems that help people notice, choose, connect, and act.

CHAPTER IX • IN CLOSING

Reflection.

ON STANCE

What design stance have you used, and why?

I designed environments, not products — parks, not casinos. I cared less about what a person does in a single session than about who they can become across many. I took this stance because the technologies shaping us most are the ones that never stop to ask permission.

ON PRIDE

What are you most proud of?

That it stayed honest. It began in my own life — a café, a friend group, my own attention — and only earned the right to speak about mothers after I had tested it on myself. The warmth in it is real, not performed.

ON PROCESS

What have you learned about your own design process?

That I think by building. I can't reason my way to a good idea in the abstract — I have to make a small, slightly embarrassing version of it and watch how people respond. My best work starts analog and personal, then turns outward.

ON ADVICE

What advice would you give future thesis students?

Start with a question you genuinely can't stop asking, then build the smallest real thing that tests it. Don't wait until it feels impressive. The thesis is not the artifact — it's the change in how you see.

*"The thesis is not the artifact — it's the **change in how you see.**"*



BIO

Shawn Smith is a graduate student in Stanford's MS Design program, where his work explores how AI agents and designed environments can support human becoming, self-authorship, and higher-order needs like attention, care, connection, and belonging.

A former data scientist, Shawn builds physical and digital "parks" that ask how technology might serve human flourishing instead of platform growth.

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