

Shopping

Place your bets and buy into the future.

Scott Seller-Mason

Sam walked into his living room, checked his watch and switched on his computer. An image of a packed football stadium filled the screen and a voice boomed out over the roar of an expectant crowd. "And now on Channel 11, the European Football Championship final, bought to you by the Institute of Physics! Where would you be tonight without physics? And where could you be tomorrow? Support physics and support fun!"

The physics reference caused Sam's interest in the football to falter, as he considered whether he would rather go science shopping instead of watching the game. Sam had seen a research project advertised that he wanted to support, and there was one that he needed to reject. And, to be honest, he didn't actually like either of the football teams playing.

"Whaddaya reckon, Virgil? A little shopping?" Sam asked his cat, which had sauntered into the room behind him. Virgil looked at the pictures of the football game and yawned. With a wink of an eye, Sam switched his computer to Internet mode.

Along with the rest of the British public, Sam had been exposed to frantic advertising campaigns from every scientific community for the past three months. Now the time had come for the public to decide in the week-long People's Internet Vote on how taxpayers' money should be spent on science research.

The policy had stemmed from public outrage back in the early '20s over the financial demands made by scientists who spent money on spectacularly flawed research projects — the doomed zepto-technology initiatives, for example. This was the third time that people had gone to the polls in 12 years and, each time, they had become obsessed with science shopping. People chatted in cafés and argued in bars about their favourite and most hated projects, and the scientists had become commercially savvy in their attempts to woo the voters. The bookmakers did a roaring trade.

Sam flicked to one of the proposals on the government website. "Smart Fabrics! Sustainable shopping!" He had seen this on a large billboard in town. "One fabric: a million patterns, a million styles. Clothes



can be cut, shaped, coloured and styled, and then changed back to an original 'base' fabric once the design begins to date." Sam had placed a bet on this project being funded and had persuaded all his friends to vote for it, but had not yet cast his own crucial vote.

He flicked to the scientific blurb. "The fabric itself will be a thin, highly flexible photonic crystal fabricated from a biomimetic cotton, with resealable seams along facets of the crystal. Colour and pattern can be incorporated by expanding or contracting tiny spaces in the material using an entirely reversible process. The shape memory will come from a crosslinking chemical in the material, which preserves the desired shape and then decouples..."

He gave up on the technical stuff. The scientists proposed that new designs could be implemented in one of a chain of shaping and colouring salons. Fantastic. "That's a winner if ever I saw one, and most importantly, at 10:1 it will make me a few quid too," Sam said to Virgil who had sidled up to the sofa. Off Sam's vote went, via the biometric modulator, into the ether.

Sam then flicked over to one of the climate-change proposals, "The impact of the expanding hydrogen economy on climate". He swivelled his head and gazed

out of the window at his new Ford Stratos on the driveway. Sam knew that earlier climate-change projects had been incredibly influential in shifting public and government opinion against hydrocarbon use. But Sam was very proud of his new (and rather expensive) car, with the latest Metalorga hydrogen tank. He hesitated for a second, and then went for the reject option, reassuring himself that he would support the project the next time round. Maybe I'll get a few extra years out of the car before it has to be scrapped, he thought to himself.

"That's the two most important ones sorted anyway," Sam sighed, and switched back to the football. As he started to settle down, a small voice came from the direction of his cat. A faint signal from Virgil's brain had been picked up by the small antenna in Virgil's collar, which initiated a recorded voice emanating from a speaker also on the collar. "Virgil is hungry. Virgil needs feeding." Sam's heart sank. Virgil had been so quiet, he was hoping the mechanism on the collar had broken.

"Talking bloody cats," he grimaced at Virgil. "Now that is something that I really should have rejected." He headed out to the kitchen to hunt for the cat food. ■

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