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Bit Valley Tomorrow

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by Tanya Clark

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Her colleague **Jun Sasaki** wants to create Net adventure playgrounds based on his laugh-a-minute graphic characters. Another student, **Jiro Ishihara**, has created an interactive map of Tokyo's subways that screens high-speed street shots of the areas above the stations as you touch the subway lines. You use your fingernail to drag the lines across the screens for special effects.

Each of these students hungers for a future in the Net -- and for someone to notice them. Niitsu, Sasaki, and Ishihara brought their ElectroptiAlternativeFuture exhibition to Bit Valley just for that reason. They are perfect representatives of Japan's future.

But, remember, eJapan is still in its formative days. When we approached the youth on the streets of Bit Valley, many were just beginning to grapple with the effect the Net could have on their lives.

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Masahiro Kawano was actually using one of the cafe's iMacs. Kawano returned from the US only the night before. After two and a half years studying in the States, he needed a job and was checking his email and the Net to see what he could land in Japan's computer industry. He already had an operating cell phone -- purchased that day. That does say something about Japan's future.

In contrast are **Saori Endo** and **Hiroko Okubo**, both barely out of school, who were hanging around Shibuya one Sunday. They teach English to children. Endo says she has no idea how to use computers, but she is a little interested in learning. Okubo uses a Net cafe sometimes for email and checking out movie and restaurant info.

Computers and online time can be expensive, especially for young people, and are far less trendy than cell phones (which in Japan can be used to send email and surf anyway).

For example, one 15-year-old teenager (decked out in head to toe black and too shy to invent a pseudonym for herself, as many of her cohorts do) tells us she wants to use a computer but doesn't have the money to buy one.

"**Riruka**" is 16 and has her own home page, but thinks the price of email is too high. (Japan still logs on to the Net paying per-minute charges to use phone lines).

Recent graduate **Akiko Katahira**, for example, began using the Net because all her friends were -- and she wants to catch up. **Yukiko Minami**, 19, a university student studying to be a dentist, bought a computer in October '99, using it for the Net and email. Minami had never used a computer before she bought her own.

In TransCafe (a trendy cafe on one of the roads leading from Shibuya to Harajuku) we met **Hiroko Yonemitsu**, a 16-year-old high school student. She has a computer at home and uses the Net to collect information on her favorite musician and for chatting with friends.

On the same street we met **Takashi Kanai** and a group of friends out shopping for the day. A student at Waseda University, Kanai is majoring in engineering because he thinks it's important to know about computers to get a job. He only started using the Net eight months ago, though. And toward Harajuku's Takeshita Doori (the area where Japan's marketers tell us many big trends start), we did find more young Japanese pursuing the Net -- to one degree or another.

Kyono, 16, plays computer games and wants to find a way to use computers in her future career as a hairstylist. **Erin**, 15, wants to be a writer and has used the Net since she was in primary school (her family has a computer at home).

Her school friend **Kayo Sakurai** does use a computer in her home. But it is her sister who uses it to connect to the Net. And in a nation where cell phones will soon outnumber landlines, Sakurai's career goal is a sparkling one: *she wants to paint designs for cell phones*.

Bit Valley youth are diverse, but there are some common themes. Many are still new to the Net and computing -- and many find their way to it through music, art, gaming, their family and friends, or their cell phone.

It is these people who will shape tomorrow and the future of Bit Valley as much as Bit Valley and Japan is shaping them today.

We can't predict the future but one thing is certain: watching how Japan's young adopt and adapt to the power of the Internet is the magic that will keep us tuning in.