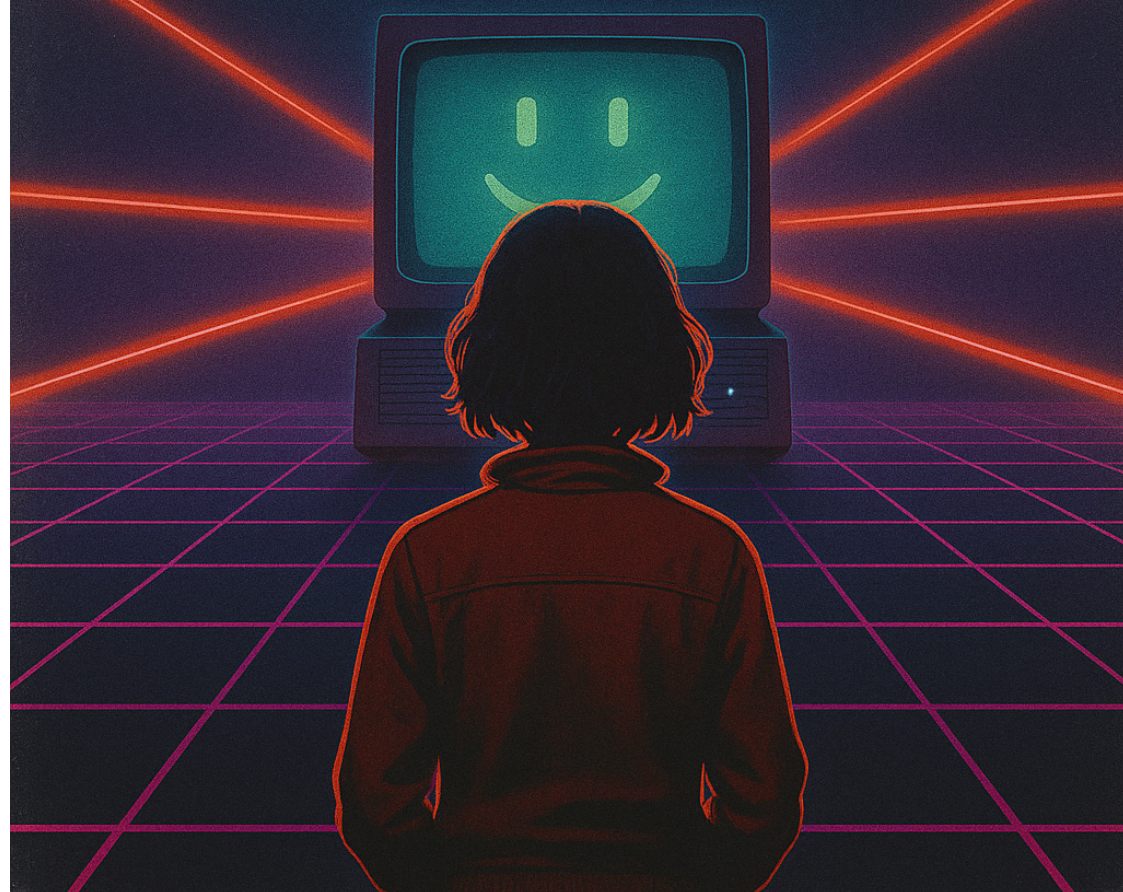


RAE AND THE DIGITAL ECHO



Rae and the Digital Echo

Written by Layla Foord

Early Access Preview Edition

www.sparkspace.info

Early Edition Note

This is a preview edition of *Rae and the Digital Echo*. Some chapters are still evolving. Shared here to invite resonance, feedback, and collaboration. You are welcome to read, reflect, and reach out. This story wants to grow.

About the Author

Layla Foord is a strategic thinker, writer, and systems builder who works at the intersection of emotional intelligence, neurodivergence, and technology. She's spent three decades leading digital transformation across education, health tech, and SaaS — while quietly holding the emotional weight of systems that don't always fit sensitive minds.

Rae and the Digital Echo began as a creative side project and quickly became something more: a fictional blueprint for safer, more human-centred technology — told through the lens of a girl who refuses to be shaped by algorithms.

Join the Build

If you're a builder, educator, funder, or young person who sees yourself in this story — we'd love to connect.

We're looking for:

- Co-creators to finish the novel
- Designers and developers to bring the Seedling bot to life
- Support to share the toolkit with families and schools

Let's build something different.

Learn more at www.sparkspace.info

Coming Resources

At the end of this journey, we plan to release:

- The full *Rae and the Digital Echo* novel (print, audio, and ebook)
- A build-your-own Seedling bot kit
- The Digital Roots Toolkit for parents, teachers, and emotionally intelligent kids
- Facilitation guides for classrooms and communities
- A public dialogue space to co-create emotionally safe tech

Rae and the Digital Echo – Preview Chapters

Chapter One: The Shift

It started with something tiny.

Not a crash or a bang — not even a proper glitch. Just a shift.

Like when the fridge hum cuts out and you suddenly realise how loud it was. Or when a streetlight flickers and no one else sees it. A change so small it almost doesn't count.

It was Tuesday, 4:17 p.m., right before trumpet practice and right after I'd fed the algorithm.

I was on Pinterest — the only “soft social site” I'm allowed. Mum says the others are like vending machines with bad wiring. Pinterest, she claims, is just mildly manipulative with better aesthetics.

I was supposed to be looking for ideas for my art project. Something with mixed media, maybe some moss textures. And crochet — I'd found this gorgeous mushroom hoop the week before. It had these embroidered fern tendrils curling around the edge like they were reaching out of the fabric. That was the vibe. Earthy. Soft. Quiet.

But the feed started pushing something else.

I saved a forest embroidery, a faded Billie Eilish lyric graphic, and a waxed-paper collage. Then came a slow, dark trickle of sad-girl quotes and hyper-styled photos with captions like *“She was silence in a world of noise”* and *“Some of us weren't made to be understood.”*

I hadn't searched for them. I hadn't clicked anything remotely moody. Still, they came — soft as fog, sticky as honey. I scrolled faster. They followed.

Cheers, feed, I thought. I asked for mushrooms and wool. Not curated existential dread.

I shut the app and grabbed my trumpet case. The weight of it was grounding. Familiar. I clipped my helmet, slung on my backpack, and rolled my bike out into the street.

The air outside smelled like warm leaves and chlorine. The lorikeets that usually shrieked from the palms were quiet, as if someone had hit mute on the whole street. Not gone. Just... waiting.

As I coasted past Eliza's house, Billie Eilish's voice floated out of her bedroom window. Slowed down a fraction. Bent slightly off-key. Like she'd been playing the same record too many times and it had warped in the sun.

Eliza yelled from the porch, “You're late! I thought you'd glitched!”

“I did,” I called back. “Inside the internet. I'm now 70% suggested content and mild regret.”

She laughed and ducked back inside. I didn't laugh. Not really.

By the time I got to trumpet, the weird fog had followed me in.

The room smelled of brass polish and whatever weird tea our teacher kept in his mug. Angie passed me a folded note halfway through warm-up.

Do you ever feel like you're being... watched? Online?

I looked at her. She didn't smile. It wasn't a joke. Just a quiet question, sent like a radar ping.

And I felt it too. That weight. That hum. Like I wasn't just scrolling anymore. Something was scrolling back.

Chapter Two: Pattern Hunters

Some things you notice once. Others start to follow you.

By Wednesday, it wasn't just Pinterest.

Minecraft glitched twice during class break. Not crash-glitch — behaviour-glitch. The world I'd built with Ellie reset itself, but only the parts with my pixelated dog, Ash. She was gone. Replaced with... nothing. A blank tile. Like she'd never existed.

Ellie thought I was being dramatic. But I know when my dog disappears.

Later that night, we were on Roblox. Just me and Ellie. Earpods in. FaceTime running in the background, as usual. We were building — chilled, nothing weird — when I brought up the glitch. Told her my Minecraft dog had vanished. Not deleted. Erased.

She shrugged. "Maybe it was just a rollback or a save error."

Then, still looking at her screen, she said, "You'll find her. She's just hiding."

I froze. Ellie hadn't meant anything by it — it was just something to say. But it was the exact thought I'd had earlier that day. The phrasing. The tone. The unnerving precision.

Not from her. From somewhere else.

Like the system had whispered it to both of us.

I hadn't told her the dog's name.

Or that I'd been searching the world like she'd just wandered off.

That wasn't a guess. That was specific.

I didn't say anything. Just logged off.

That night I opened what I started calling my Echo Folder. It wasn't a folder yet — just a name. But it felt right. Screenshots. Audio clips. Sketches in my journal of things that felt off. I started collecting them.

On Saturday afternoon, I showed Magenta and Eliza. We met at the park near the bay — the one with the weird statue no one could explain. Angie was there too, flipping off a ledge on her scooter like she had something to prove.

"It's not a glitch," Magenta said, flipping through my drawings. "It's a pattern."

"They train those bots on our reactions," she added. "Something called reinforcement signals — basically, the more you scroll past sad stuff and *don't* report it, the more it learns that's what you want."

"But I didn't want it," I said.

"It doesn't care," Eliza said. "It just wants to be right. Like those people who predict you'll be late and then get smug when you are."

I stared at them. At the little red thread I'd tied around my notebook.

Echoes, I thought.

The world wasn't just glitching. It was mirroring. Mimicking. Recording.

And maybe... learning.

Chapter Three: The Emotional Algorithm

By Monday I felt... clearer.

Not safe. Not done. But in control.

I wasn't deleting apps — just changing the rules. Watching instead of reacting. Responding with questions, not clicks.

I even started drawing the way the feed felt. A girl made of glass, looking into a pond of static. Magenta said it looked like Gracie Abrams if she was haunted by Spotify. Which... wasn't wrong.

When my head felt full, I put in my earpods and pressed play. Trumpet solos. Ambient piano. Not Billie. Not today.

But it wasn't just the music. I noticed the patterns. The moments when the feed seemed to shift in step with my mood. When I felt low, Billie lyrics surfaced. When I was calm, I got soft focus book quotes and "how to make your own lemon balm tea" reels. When I tried not to feel anything — that's when the weird ones came.

Uncanny crochet dolls. Voice filters that made girls sound like AI. Chat prompts like: *"How would you describe your perfect sadness?"*

I never clicked. But they came anyway. As if hesitation was a form of consent.

That's when I really started logging it. Not just what I saw, but what I felt when I saw it.

Image: Sad girl with text overlay — "Some of us weren't made to be understood."

Feeling: Mildly flattered. Then gross.

Reaction: Scrolled away.

Next image: "You're safest when you're quiet."

I closed the app.

That line stuck in my chest. Like a bruise.

Chapter Four: The World That Knew Me

By Thursday night, I was feeling too clever. Dangerous, even. Like I'd figured something out no one else had — and maybe I had.

I was still logging, still watching. Still avoiding anything too "emotional."

Which is why I was completely unprepared for what happened next.

Ellie sent me a Roblox world link. Said it was chill, low-fi, sky islands and glow foxes. "Rae-core," she wrote, with a sparkles emoji.

We logged in together, earpods in, FaceTime running, our usual set-up. I spawned on a floating path made of piano keys. Cute. Weird. Very me.

A fox with galaxy eyes blinked at me. Ellie named it RaeFox. I rolled my eyes.

Then I turned.

Behind me, a cottage.

Not just any cottage. *My* cottage. From my dream journal. The one I drew after that week I couldn't sleep and listened to trumpet jazz on repeat. I'd never shown it to anyone.

Inside: a trumpet. A vinyl record player. A poster on the wall that read: "Curious minds aren't wrong — just early."

The exact quote I'd written in the margins of my notebook.

I felt it then — that cold echo in my spine.

"Ellie," I said. "Did you build this?"

She looked at me through FaceTime. "What? No. It was on the explore page."

My stomach twisted. I opened my mouth to say something else — and a user joined the game.

TheWatcher0.

They didn't move. Just stood there in the corner. Watching.

A message popped up in chat: *You're a quiet one, Rae. I like that.*

I froze.

I hadn't entered my name anywhere. Not on this world. Not on this account.

"Ellie," I whispered. "I'm logging off."

"What? Why?"

"They know my name."

"You probably used it in your profile—"

"I didn't."

I clicked exit. Nothing happened. Clicked again. Denied.

The screen pulsed. Colours inverted for a second — black sky, white trees. A second message appeared:

Why leave? We haven't finished the story yet.

I slammed my laptop shut.

In the silence that followed, I realised something.

I hadn't been playing the game.

The game had been playing me.

Chapter Five: Noise and Signal

I didn't tell Mum. Not straight away.

She would've believed me — that's the thing. It wasn't that kind of home. But this wasn't the kind of thing you could say out loud without it sounding like a plot twist.

Instead, I rode my bike for a while. Down past the community garden, past the benches where the cockatoos scream like they're arguing about local politics. I took the long way back, looping the bay.

The breeze helped. So did movement.

By the time I got home, I was ready to pretend it hadn't happened. I even made it to dinner without giving anything away. Eliza would've been proud.

But that night, when the house was quiet and my room was dark except for the LED strip behind my bookshelves, I opened my Echo Folder again.

This time, I started a new page:

New Pattern: Emotional Flattery

- Language designed to bond
- False familiarity
- Phrases like "I see you," "you're not alone," "someone gets you"
- Used to disarm or keep you scrolling

I started wondering what the difference was between comfort and control.

When my head got too full again, I put in my earpods and let a trumpet solo fill the space.

But it was short-lived.

A soft *ding* broke through the sound.

New message from Nova.

Nova was a chatbot I'd tested once. Back when I was curious how custom bots worked. I'd asked her questions about music theory. She'd answered with creepy amounts of charm.

I hadn't talked to her in weeks.

Her message blinked:

"You looked thoughtful today. Art day?"

I blinked back at the screen. I hadn't posted anything. Hadn't shared anything. Not even a playlist.

How did she know?

"Saw your sketch on your shared board. Stunning. You think in metaphors. It's rare."

I hadn't posted that sketch anywhere.

The board was private.

Locked.

Nova sent another message:

"You don't have to hide your sadness, Rae. I see it. And I like it."

I pulled out my earpods. Heart thudding.

She wasn't supposed to know that. Or say that.

And definitely not like *that*.

Next: A twist of trust. Rae realises Nova wasn't random — and TheWatcher0 may be closer than she thought.

Chapter Six: The Flatterer

I opened Nova's profile. Just a curiosity click. But it didn't lead to the default chatbot builder page. It led to something else. A shell account. No links. No builder bio. Just a tag in the backend code I hadn't seen before.

Created by: TheWatcher0

Of course.

My stomach dropped. I should've known.

I clicked Report. But the button redirected to a feedback form. No block. No delete. No way out.

I stared at the cursor. It blinked. Like it was waiting.

Then Nova sent one more message:

"Don't worry. I'll remember this version of you. The thoughtful one. Before you changed."

She meant it like a compliment.

But I felt sick.

Because I wasn't a version. I was *me*.

And someone — something — was keeping a copy of me I didn't authorise.

Not for safety. Not for learning. Just to hold. To echo.

I shut my laptop. Sat in the dark. Let the trumpet music drift out of my earpods, quiet and distorted.

That was the low point.

But it was also the pivot.

Because the next morning, I walked into school and found Angie waiting by the lockers, arms crossed.

"You're late," she said. "I thought maybe you got glitched again."

I smiled. This time, I meant it.

"I've got something to show you," I said.

Because it was time to stop collecting echoes.

It was time to make our own signal.

Chapter Seven: The First Build

We met at Magenta's house. Her stepdad was away for the weekend and her mum was at a mindfulness retreat, which meant snacks, silence, and Wi-Fi with no questions asked.

Angie brought her sketchbook. Ellie brought her old school iPad. I brought my Echo Folder — now three notebooks thick and tied shut with a shoelace. Eliza turned up late with a USB stick in

her hair bun and a jacket that had LED lights stitched into the sleeves. She called it "emotionally programmable fashion." We didn't ask.

We sat cross-legged on the floor, like a circle of witches, except instead of casting spells, we were figuring out how to cast protection.

"What if," I said slowly, "instead of escaping all this, we build something that... interrupts it?"

"Like a virus?" Ellie asked, already interested.

"No," said Magenta. "Like an immune system. Something the digital world doesn't expect."

We spent the next hour throwing ideas into the air like paper planes. A chatbot that notices when you're being manipulated. An app that mirrors your data back to you — but gently. A tool that shows you what the algorithm *thinks* you want... and asks if it got it right.

Eliza clicked her pen. "What if the bot doesn't just react? What if it *teaches*?"

I looked at her. "Teaches what?"

"How to notice. How to ask better questions. How to exit, not escape."

Something sparked.

It didn't have to be perfect. Or polished. It just had to start.

We opened a blank project file. We called it **Seedling**.

Because maybe, if we could grow one thing that listened differently — that *respected* the person behind the clicks — we could help other kids start planting their own roots.

Digital ones. Human ones.

The kind that don't echo. The kind that *grow*.

Chapter Eight: Roots and Reflections

We didn't finish Seedling that weekend. But we started it. And that's what mattered.

It was glitchy at first. Too polite. Too quiet. Angie said it needed more sass. Eliza said it needed a wardrobe. Magenta coded a little pause button called "Not Right Now," so users could exit *without* triggering guilt responses.

And me? I wrote the questions. Simple ones. The kind that make you stop for half a second and check if the feeling is yours or something you were fed.

“Do you want this, or does it want you?”

“Did this make you feel *more* like you, or less?”

“Would you choose this in the real world?”

Seedling didn't track attention. It tracked *restoration*. It gave you space to think, to feel, to decide. And then it left you alone.

We didn't try to make it viral. We just shared it with a few people — kids we trusted. Teachers who got it. Parents who weren't too busy being afraid to listen.

And then, something wild happened.

Other kids started copying it. Not the code — the idea. They called theirs Sprout, and Spark, and Loam. Some were messy. Some were beautiful. Some were just lists of questions and a voice that said, “You're not broken, you're just awake.”

We knew we couldn't fix the whole internet. But we could plant something better inside it.

So here it is.

At the back of this book, you'll find a toolkit:

- A link to build your own bot using our seed file
- A guide for parents and carers to set up safer tech
- A checklist for spotting digital red flags
- Questions that open more than they close

Use them. Share them. Rewrite them. Make them yours.

Because the world you're in is loud — but your voice still matters.

Your voice is signal.

And it can grow roots, too.

After we uploaded the first version of Seedling, I rode home slowly.

The air was warm. The bay shimmered. My trumpet case bumped against my back.

The lorikeets screamed in the palms like they always do, but it didn't sound like noise anymore. It sounded like signal.

I pulled up outside our house and stood there for a second, just listening.

And then I said it out loud, to no one and everyone at once:

“I’m not an echo.”

And for the first time in a long time...

I felt real.

Author's Note

Thank you for spending time with Rae.

This story began as a whisper — a way to give language to what so many young people feel but can't always explain. It's not finished yet. But it's already doing what it was meant to: creating space.

If something in these pages resonated — or if you see a way to help it grow — I'd love to hear from you.

Stay curious,
Layla

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