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MESH 16

> **Lisa Gye and Darren Tofts** The Holographic Nursery

Angela Ndalianis Worlds Of Tomorrow ... Today

Rolando Caputo Design for Living: J.G.Ballard and the Visionary Present.

Kathy Cleland Domestic Robots

Russell Blackford Smart, Sinister, Strange: Houses of the Future in Science Fiction Film

Julie Clarke A 'Case' for future existence, or Mutate Now and Live Forever

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Sue Morris The Grass is Always Greener in RGB: Ideology, Desire and Pleasure in The Sims

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Preface

Of the many conundrums that troubled the singular mind of Herbert Ashe, custodian of the archives of the Museum of Contemporary Ideas, none was so troubling—so uncomfortably real—as the contents of Folio #602. What follows is the contents of this folio, reproduced for the first time, and an explanatory note.

Reflections on “the Holographic Nursery”

In 1950 the science fiction writer Ray Bradbury published a curious short story called “The Veldt” (which was subsequently published in his collection, *The Illustrated Man*). A glimpse of what the future might look like, “The Veldt” details life at home for the Hadley family, a prototypical nuclear family living in the nuclear age. Enamoured of technology and all that it promises to deliver in the pursuit of the good life, George, Lydia and their children, Wendy and Peter, are proud owners of the “Happy-life Home”, the acme of display home excellence. A state of the art pleasure dome, the “Happy-life Home” exceeds even the most futuristic of atomic age speculation when it comes to modern conveniences: light sensors that respond to movement, air closets that whisk you up to bed, dinner tables that apologise when the ketchup is not on hand. But by far the technological showcase of the “Happy-life Home” is a high tech children’s playroom, or “holographic nursery”. A three dimensional space of n-dimensional possibility, the nursery is a testament to the consumer age expectation that technology will fulfil every desire, completely and instantly. In this the principle of the room is straightforward: “You sent out your thoughts. Whatever you thought would appear” (p.11).

We immediately recognize this playroom as a virtual reality environment, a responsive, immersive space in which the conceptual line between reality and simulation, still being grappled with today, doesn’t exist. The holographic nursery is extreme media, a programmable dream theatre in which any fantasy or scenario can be played out, its capacity and verisimilitude only limited by the imagination of its users. The title of the

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story refers to a particular scenario of which the Hadley children have become quite fond, an African veldt, complete with a hot yellow sun that brings perspiration to the brow, a waterhole, antelope, zebras, vultures and, of greatest attraction to Peter and Wendy, lions. The veldt scenario, with its oppressive heat, violence and death, is dramatically rendered by Bradbury as an allegory of the Freudian "family romance", in which the rebellious struggle for authority between father and children is acted out in the battle over the veldt as an appropriate environment for their pleasure. Unresponsive to their father's invocations for a change of scenario, the playroom—not the children, mind—is suspected of having something wrong with it and a psychologist is called in to make an assessment. George Hadley, with dire presentiment, suspects that the playroom will not like being turned off. His trepidation is warranted in a story in which the virtual has a tendency to queer into the real, in lions that look "too real" (p.8) and in the bloodcurdling screams that emanate throughout the house. Projections of patricidal desire, these screams, too, will eventually become too real. In the story's chilling denouement, the fate of the Hadley parents is sealed in the manual, banal flicking of the switch that "killed the nursery" (p.17).

Bradbury's "Happy-life Home" is a parable of domesticity in the age of cybernetics—a concept as enticing to his generation as it is to ours.² No conceptual distinctions between house and home here, the Happy-life Home takes care of every need, second-guessing the thoughts and desires of its inhabitants, such as eating, sleeping or doing the housework. Meals are cooked, served and cut up for them, shoes are shined and laced, beds rock them to sleep and soothing music is played when they are feeling stressed. In other words, their home gently and inconspicuously modulates the Hadley

Hadley family's reliance on voluntary action with the "soft automaticity" (p.7) of artificial intelligence. The home, an intimate extension of their bodies and minds, relieves the family of the need to have to actually think about doing anything—the motivation, in fact, for buying it in the first place. In this paradise of involuntary action, the very idea of home is transformed into a

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complex ecology, a veritable homeostasis of human-machine life.

Bradbury's portrait of the "Happy-life Home" is uncannily prescient in today's world. It is as if he was projecting into his own present a glimpse of the future of our own present. Bradbury's vignette of the house of tomorrow is weird *déjà vu*, a retro-futurist portrait of the technology of the familiar. Today, the familiar, say, the humble refrigerator, combines with the becoming-familiar, such as the Internet, to form intelligent appliances that purport to make the daily work of living that much easier. LG Electronics' "Internet Refrigerator", the company's vice president tells us, does much more than simply keep food fresh and dispense ice cubes. Combining Net access, email, radio, videophone, digital camera and a host of other digital services, the Internet Refrigerator is being marketed as the ultimate in technological convergence and progressive living. The promotions campaign for this wonder of domestic technology is clearly underwritten by new media savvy publicists. Their UK motto, "Digitally yours", crystallises the notion that digital technologies are becoming more pervasive in our daily lives and their job is clearly to make the business of living both easier and groovier. A visit to the LG Electronics website reveals that the Internet Refrigerator is, in fact, merely one node in an entire "digital home network", providing server support for Net enabled microwave, washing machine and air conditioner. The idea behind the digital home network is to seamlessly interconnect appliances into the very texture of domestic space and routine, to such an extent that even when you are not at home, home is never far away and is always within the reach of our control. Having full access to the digital home network via mobile phone, LG Electronics proudly announce, "you can turn your washing on, download a Thai chicken curry Microwave recipe or cool your home down at the touch of a button".³ Life's good.

The reality of a digital home network reveals how far our domestic appliances have evolved from labour-saving devices to cybernetic entities, smart gadgets that synthesise with us to form an extensive, integrated communications circuit that, by any other name, is our home. Not so long

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ago we were satisfied with manifestos for cyborgs. Now, in the time of technological ubiquity, humans and machines are spliced into the same feedback loop of command and control—the informatic home. But even in our over-networked age, where the refrigerator is being groomed as the hub of domestic life, Bradbury's "model" of the futuristic home seems more state of the art than ever. The Internet fridge will no doubt be treated harshly by history, relegated to its proverbial dustbin (probably the next thing to be networked) as a hideous, anachronistic joke:

Watch TV, listen to music or surf the internet using this titanium finish, state-of-the-art fridge freezer. It's the ultimate in kitchen technology with a built-in MP3 player for downloading and playing music from the internet, e-mail and video mail using a built in camera and microphone. It even has full internet access so you can re-stock the refrigerator on-line or check on the latest news and weather—all without leaving the kitchen.⁴

The optional extra, it would seem, in this cornucopia of technological ecstasy, is that "it's great for storing food too".

The astonishing conclusion to be drawn from this elusive document from Folio #602, should we dare to contemplate it, is that Bradbury's explorations into the idea of a holographic nursery would seem to have been more advanced than at first thought. Moreover, the idea of his story as presenting a kind of blue-print or model for the invention of a simulated reality, would appear to have been validated in the unsettling contents of this fabulous archive. Bradbury's story of the too real, a real in excess of the real, has introduced strange and beguiling issue into the world, not the least of which being the patented invention of a reality machine that, today, continues to defy duplication. Researchers at MIT Media Lab, for instance, have for the last five years been struggling to put together a team to construct an interactive nursery in the fashion of Bradbury's story, as part of their program in 'Interaction Techniques for Virtual Environments'.⁵ With a four year timeline and team of twenty people, the project parameters are straightforward enough—not to mention the resources: "money no object". But once the hard realities of the virtual encroach upon the task, the real

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problems start: "Are you building a 'Veldt' (single setting, African scene) or the 'Nursery' (can show anything that the mind comes up with)". The veldt is, as they concede, "hard enough".

The list of conceptual and technological challenges is considerable, ranging from the kind of artificial intelligence engine required, the choice between narrative and scenic modes of interaction, to speech recognition and haptic feedback specifications. The level of detail and quality of reflection is admirable, but once the project coordinators start pondering the issue of creating the illusion of movement in this hyperreal world-within-a-world, things really do start falling apart at the seams. Here are the options under consideration:

- Military jogging machine, very good rollers w(ith) harness
 - Panasonic swimming pool, current generator
 - Japanese ski slope in dome (anything can be done to make you feel like you're going faster than you are)
 - Elevator in Albuquerque science museum—mining exhibit
- Resorting to analogue supplements to fool the senses into the illusion of movement attests to the limitations of today's technology. Bradbury's nursery is, on the contrary, like a Renaissance memory theatre, a genuine and compelling space of perambulation, the sensory gestalt of being there.

Afterthought

The lessons of the virtual are far-reaching. In 1963, Mutual of Omaha introduced *Wild Kingdom* to a television public still hungry for the possibilities of the medium. Every week, *Wild Kingdom*—a pioneer of the nature show format—transported viewers on a Sunday night to the four corners of the globe to experience wild nature in all its variety. From the safety of home and hearth, viewers could experience the thrill of wrestling alligators and anacondas, or jumping on to the back of an elk in Montana from a helicopter, without leaving their arm chairs. The show's founder and long-time host, zoologist Marlin Perkins, was no doubt thinking of the mass

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media potential of television as an extension of that other marvellous technology to which his sponsors gave their imprimatur. *Wild Kingdom*, though, was often criticised for being too staged, for representing a safe, sanitised and sound-tracked experience of dangerous encounters between humans and wild animals. Inferior to the visceral drama of the holographic nursery in every way, *Wild Kingdom* was a testament to a medium that aspired to, but never achieved, the too real. Marlin Perkins died in 1986. It was rumoured that his last wish was to experience the veldt at first hand.

It is our eternal hope that the directors of *Mutual of Omaha* were sympathetic.

1-Ray Bradbury, *The Illustrated Man* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1952). Quotations are taken from the 1972 Corgi Books edition (London: Transworld Publishers Ltd).

2-"The Veldt" continues to preoccupy contemporary thinkers engaged in the work of theorising the interface between humans and technology. See McKenzie Wark, "Too Real", in D. Tofts, Jonson, A. & Cavallaro, A. (eds) *Prefiguring Cyberculture: An Intellectual History* (Sydney: Power Publications/Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 2002).

3-www.lginternetfamily.co.uk/homenetwork.asp

4-www.lginternetfamily.co.uk/homenetwork.asp

5-http://cs.www.media.mit.edu/courses/interaction98/11_24_notes.html

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