Christopher Langton’s bright blue, inflated PVC facade, built for the entrance of Experimenta’s recent House of Tomorrow exhibition symbolised the concerns of this collection of new media art. Reminiscent of The Futuro House created by architect Matti Suuronen in 1968, which looked like the spaceship from Tim Burton’s Mars Attacks, Langton’s facade created a sense of nostalgia for the future that characterised many of the world fairs, home expos and films of the 1950s and 60s. This sense of retro-futurism was used by the exhibition curators to guide their selections for the program. But, they were particularly concerned with how domestic technologies are shaped by the fusion of our present desires and fears, technological capabilities and ongoing obsessions with past imaginings of the future.

Like its predecessors, such as Robin Boyd’s House of Tomorrow exhibited at the 1949 Modern Home Exhibition in Melbourne, this show offered both “futuristic visions of the living environment through new technology” and a “forum to critique, to parody and to play.” Some works would have been equally at home in a trade show, which is not to condemn them—rather, to suggest that in an age of internet connected refrigerators and microwaves, the line between function and fable is blurry.

Zizi the Affectionate Couch (Stephen Barrass, Linda Davy, Kerry Richens, Australia, 2003) is one such work. Gorgeously upholstered in pink and purple velvet, Zizi is a responsive ottoman that growls when sat on, purrs when touched and groans with delight when caressed. Designed to support you both physically and emotionally, Zizi evokes the responsive air conditioning system that not only adjusts itself according to your presence in the room but, as a recent TV-ad suggests, mysteriously makes you cups of coffee. Zizi would be right at home in this paradise of involuntary action where the home is transformed into a veritable homeostasis of human-machine life. I’m surprised the artists weren’t asked to take orders.
Virsual—The Digital Rocking Horse (Steven Mieszelewicz, Nimrod Weis and Asaf Weis, Australia, 2003) is billed by its creators as “the ultimate toy for the playroom of the future.” Virsual brings to mind the Holographic Nursery envisioned by writer Ray Bradbury in his short story, “The Veldt.” Riding a rocking horse equipped with a motion-sensing device, users navigate a 3D simulated environment projected on a screen in front of them. The faster you rock, the more rapidly you move through the depicted terrain of Virsual Island, collecting apples and horseshoes with the aim of finding the end of the rainbow. The immense popularity of this work at the exhibition suggests a ready market through Toys R Us.

Not all the works promised domestic futures of benign comfort. Many were far more unheimlich—to use Freud’s famous term. Sally Blenheim’s Dirty Pillows (2000), for example, critiques the desire to see technology as a substitute for human companionship and comfort. Blenheim invites the user to lie on a bed facing a monitor on which a woman’s face is projected. The woman gazes back at the user, occasionally blinking but perpetually passive. As users are drawn into the woman’s gaze, they are simultaneously reminded of the “ultimate emptiness that televizual relationships offer.”

Similarly, Expecting (Isobel Knowles, Van Sowerwine, Australia, 2003) disrupts the belief that new technologies can replace real nurturing with a virtual equivalent. The user is invited to create playmates for 8-year old Charlotte who is imprisoned on a screen in her virtual bedroom. Using a teddy bear as an interface, users can affect the animation on the screen by squeezing the bear. As you squeeze, Charlotte’s belly appears to distend until eventually she gives birth (quite grotesquely) to a virtual playmate who, after a short while, vanishes. Without user input, Charlotte remains alone (and presumably lonely) in her room, suggesting that only human intervention, and not technologies, is capable of alleviating human alienation and isolation.

Mirror D (Marco Bresciani, Sam De Silva, Australia, 2003) plays on the ambivalence of our relationship with new technologies by drawing attention to the tendency of surveillance technologies to disrupt the very sense of security they purportedly strive to engender. A digital mirror takes the user’s reflection and digitally distorts it in ways that make the user question the veracity of the claim that the mirror (or the CCTV camera) never lies. In an age of increased visual surveillance and digital technologies, Mirror D reminds us that appearances can be deceptive. The very tools we use to protect ourselves from the alien and unknown can just as easily alienate us from the world and from our selves.

House of Tomorrow will tour nationally to towns and cities in 2004 and 2005. More information about the exhibition can be found at www.experimenta.org/