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Tech 2010

A Catalog of the Near Future

Just a short time ago,

it was perfectly acceptable to pass yourself off as a **technophobe**; in fact, for many, it was a matter of pride. Technophobia ruled. Nobody but geeks and early-adopter oddballs used computers for anything more than typing. Just owning a cell phone, never mind talking on it in public, was an invitation to be called a jerk. In the early 1990's, even **Luddites** briefly had their day again, whipping up fears about how computers would run our lives, wrecking the possibilities for **human intimacy** and making the future a mean, dismal place.

Somewhere along the way, however, all that doom and gloom drifted out to sea, pushed away not by blue-sky idealism but by a temperate, **practical faith** in the idea that machines are nothing to be afraid of, that we can use them when, where and how we want to use them and that technology might actually improve our lives.

In the pages that follow, the magazine looks at dozens of **futuristic concepts** and devices that will be filtering into the mainstream of American society on or around the year 2010. The date is not totally arbitrary. It allows us to straddle the realms of science fiction and **science nonfiction**. Ten years out is just near enough to retain a meaningful link to the present (many of the technologies here are well along in the development process), but distant enough to add up to a world that feels different, though not all that different, from the one we live in now.

We've designed the issue as a catalog, but it's not simply an array of gadgets. By 2010, sophisticated, interactive functions will be knit seamlessly into children's toys and **grown-ups' toys**, into our kitchens, backyards and every place we go. The catalog format is more than a useful way of organizing this wide range of goods. It's also a metaphor for how technology is evolving these days. It used to seem as if new gadgets were just issued forth from remote R. and D. labs, and we took whatever we got. Now the high-tech possibilities seem limitless and the consumer is **suddenly powerful**, deciding the shape and feel of the near future. If those machines do end up running our lives, it will only be because we want them to.

A CATALOG OF THE NEAR FUTURE

Tech 2010

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The Blind Date Who Is Your Destiny

BY AMANDA GRISCOM

In 1998, Michael Borer developed the LoveGety to help Japanese teenagers find romance. Using omnidirectional radio waves, the LoveGety senses anyone within a 50-foot range who is also carrying the device, then receives and displays data on how far that person might want to get involved. (The five modes are chat, dinner, dance, kiss and love.) Two million were sold in Japan in the first year.

Borer is now developing an updated model for sale in America. The Electronic Cupid will store an encrypted profile of its owner — based on questions about background, hobbies and morals

— and when two carriers come within range, their devices will automatically swap profiles and evaluate compatibility.

These gadgets, however, may be outdated soon after they hit the market. Online dating services will soon be able to stream personal data to personal digital assistants, beepers and cellular phones. And since the data will be stored on servers rather than in the hardware itself, it can include the sort of exhaustive information, gleaned from lengthy questionnaires and personal essays, that traditional dating services pride themselves on. Anyone belonging to a service will be electronically notified when another member is in the vicinity, and in the amount of time it takes to call up a file, can download detailed information on that person and make some quick decisions about whether love is in the air.

Ted Selker of the M.I.T. Media Lab says that this is just the beginning of a new kind of mating ritual. Selker is currently creating devices that monitor what he calls our “implicit” modes of communication, the “tells” in our computer-using patterns. One of Selker’s text-based programs scans a person’s e-mail, searching for common and quirky words, then makes conclusions about what that language says about personality. Another project, the “interest tracker,” is capable of scanning the eye movements of someone browsing the Web to determine what kind of information he is drawn to, down to the millisecond. It then uses that growing cache of data to constantly update one’s personality profile. These profiles, which Selker says are infinitely more sophisticated — and accurate — than the paper-and-pencil profiles used by dating services, can then be cross-referenced with those stored and broadcast by other’s machines, assessing much more than whether two people might hit it off for dinner and a movie.

When asked if this doesn’t take some of the mystery out of courtship, Selker’s response is purely pragmatic. “You have to realize that a lifelong partner isn’t just about combustible,” he says. “Computers will help us understand who we really are as opposed to who we think we are.” ■