

FASTEN YOUR SEATBELTS

Richard Neville

First published in the Good Weekend on the 1st of January 2000.

The end of death – and reading. (Why wade through Kafka when there's the virtual reality game?) The return of the zeppelin. A customised God. No teachers over 30. Welcome to an A to Z of tomorrowland ...

A is for Alternatives, the contemplation of which is at the heart of futures thinking. Once the provenance of artists and visionaries, the collaborative imagining of a variety of futures is now undertaken in schools, communities, corporations and nation-states. At a "policy conference" organised by the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry in September, and opened by the Federal Minister for Industry, Science and Resources, Senator Nick Minchin, business leaders were presented with four in-depth "likely" scenarios for the year 2015. In essence, these were:

First Global Nation: Australia shows leadership in a silicon valley world. A vital young country reinvents itself to capitalise on the massive transformations of business and society. Our cyber-savvy firms sparkle on Wall Street, wealth is shared, the arts flourish.

Sound the Retreat: Globalisation falls apart, trade barriers are rebuilt, nationalism resurges. We forge commercial partnerships with key nations and, drawing on our melting-pot past, create a cultural gateway. Oz is the Switzerland of Asia.

Brave Old World: Over-reliant on tourism and glamorous-yet-scant biotech breakthroughs, we miss the global tide. Introspective and smug, the lopping of tall poppies resumes, fed by an attitude of "she'll be right". The economy falters and major brands move offshore.

Green is Gold: About 2007, an eco-catastrophe puts the nation on a war-style emergency footing. Skyscrapers sprout trees, goods are produced from renewable resources with zero emissions. Profits and lifestyles are enhanced by a "whole systems" economy designed to restore the balance of nature.

Such scenarios are meant to jolt the imagination and promote adaptability, rather than "come true". Which will happen? Who can say.

B is for the Berlin Wall and for Boundaries, the collapse of the former speeding the disappearance of the latter. What walls are coming down in your world? Between real and artificial, perhaps, between wholesale and retail, mind and body, east and west, accountancy and law, night and day.

The revised HSC curriculum, with its vocational training, pushes the schoolroom further into the workplace.

Calvin Klein's \$100 perfume, cK One, ignores the distinctions of gender and triumphs in the market. Radio talkback is not the only media outlet to obliterate the boundary between editorial and advertising (for example, travel sections). A design exhibition in Barcelona introduces the concept of ToolToys – fun products which feed both utilitarian and emotional needs, blurring the borders between productivity and play.

While some walls seem to be firming (rich/poor, town/country, plugged/unplugged), the overwhelming thrust of the future is the bulldozing of boundaries – between public and private, consumer and producer, grown-up and child.

B is also for the Bronzing of humanity, the multicultural stew pot foreseen by some demographers.

A century ago, the world's population was roughly half white and half non-white. At present, the world's "white population", however defined, is down to about 20 per cent. In 50 years, if trends continue, it will be about 1 to 5 per cent of the total. Watch for the Bollywood remake of Guess Who's Coming to Dinner.

C is for Corporations, the predominant future-shapers of our post-communist world. Power brings pressure. An informed community demands higher standards. Titans of industry struggle to switch from robber barons to role models. Can business really reinvent itself for a new period in history?

Watch for the widespread adoption of triple-bottom-line accountancy. This will measure environmental sustainability and social responsibility. It spans toxic emissions, sexual harassment, false advertising and far-flung sweatshops. As a string of megacorps have discovered – Shell, Burger King, Nike, Monsanto – share values can be hit hard by misreading the signals of community outrage.

Other drivers of change:

- * The disappearance of secrets.
- * The cyber-empowered critic will be able to ferret out unpleasant facts and organise negative PR – as happened to Ford, when its internal (uncomplimentary) safety reports were posted on the Net.
- * The feminisation of leadership will widen the horizons of the boys in the boardroom..
- * The rise of ethical investment funds will merge the value of a firm's social identity with its brand identity.
- * Rapidly rising expectations of a digitised workforce will lead to an eccentric array of "lifestyle inducements", from in-house massage, gourmet cooking and concierge services to child care, elder care and pet care.

Ultimately, tomorrow's employee will demand meaningful work in an organisation which thinks beyond the bottom line, leading to the suggestion that globally responsible business could become the Beatlemania of the next decade. Watch for the publication of a widely ratified Declaration of Corporate Responsibilities.

D is for Death, whose abolition by natural causes is now considered achievable, even by experts not known to be mad. Such could not be said of those actually seeking to inhabit their body forever.

E is for Education, Entertainment and Experience, which are turning into the same thing. "Why should I sit through an archaeology lecture," asks today's student, "when I can go on a dig?" Virtual reality has moved beyond simulated aircraft landings to claim it can offer the experience of being a blood cell, a leaf on a tree, even to replicate reading

Kafka – his paranoid atmospherics have been converted into an elaborate philosophical game, where data-gloved students are immersed in a maze of ethical dilemmas, intrigues, fears, confusions.

A satellite service delivers "Virtual Voyages" to more than 4,000 US classrooms, offering live inter-actions with TV crews visiting science labs, under-water sites, archaeological digs and artists' studios.

The educational revolution is not confined to technology. Late last year, this question was put to a conference of Australian educators: what learning activities would transform schools from being bastions of boredom to cauldrons of excitement? Among the answers: junk formal assessment, allow flexible attendance and choice of classes, eliminate teachers over 30, reduce the hours spent sitting and writing, let learning be student-directed, and bulldoze the buildings.

F is for the Future, approaching at the speed of light, and our Feelings towards it, be these fearful or fancy-free. While most focus is on technical whizzbangery (you, too, can land a plane at Bombay on the Net), the shape of tomorrow hinges on the unfolding of human psychology and its enhancement (the goal of the much-derided self-growth movement). How do we acquire new perceptual and relationship skills, cope with the inner critic and baying hordes and still be able to process multiple realities and values? Puzzling over these unfolding social dynamics is sure to inspire a new genre: psychological futurism.

In a sentence, the future is a race between self-destruction and self-discovery.

G is for God in the 21st century: bisexual, user-friendly, market-driven. A customised God. While every trend invokes a counter-trend – hence the resurgence of fundamentalism – the overwhelming thrust of worship in the West is towards a do-it-yourself religion. A little bit of Hindu (as in yoga), a little bit of Halloween, a little bit of Hail Mary.

Could futurism itself be in danger of becoming a religion? Perhaps its adherents are unconsciously succumbing to an urge to flee from the present into a state of rapture over the glories to come ("preferred futures"), condemning the rest (non-clients) to the hellfires of Blade Runner. Worse, are futurists aspiring to be God, imposing a future scenario woven from their own frailties and fantasies?

G is also for Globalisation, a trend so pervasive as to be considered inevitable. Of which the same was said about fascism. Consider the famous slogan of Microsoft: "Where do you want to go today?" To whom does the personal pronoun really apply?

H is for Health care, the changes in which are likely to lead to the disappearance of Hospitals. Not because people will be free of illness, but because miniature instruments and remote procedures will put an end to surgeons sawing and axing the human frame, the major cause of prolonged recuperation.

I is for Identity, groping to become multifaceted, ever-expanding, fearlessly fluid. The death of the job-for-life means the death of the self-for-life. No longer can work, customs or early toilet training box you in to a fixed personality. Chat shows have evolved into chat sites, where every facet of yourself can be taken out and aired; the therapy of Voice Dialogue converses with a series of sub-personalities, as though each

were a guest on The Oprah Winfrey Show. (Oprah herself, the mistress of self-reinvention, now teaches a leadership course at a business academy.)

J is for the Jones International University, the site of the first fully accredited online academy (www.jonesinternational.edu). J is also for Jungle, farewell, farewell.

K is for Knowledge, evolving into civilisation's dominant resource. Few people appreciate the incredible impact entailed in the switching of civilisation's major resource from things to symbols, from something scarce to something infinite. Knowledge is invisible, intangible and widely accessible. Unlike oil or gold, it expands and evolves with use. Information can flash across the earth in a second. It's so keen to be free that it leaks, which is why secrets are an endangered concept. (*Seven years later, the "dominant resource" is now innovation*).

L is for Love, long out of its gender and racial cage and soon to migrate to non-human beings. Children who rushed to acquire Sony's Net-marketed Robo-dog, Aibo, are enmeshing their fledgling emotions with a companionable machine, to uncertain outcomes. Self-learning robots simulating a repertoire of cuddly emotions are likely to evoke sweaty desire – then what? An adjacent seat on the plane, therapy, divorce? When conference audiences are asked who's likely to end up with legal custody of the children, the verdict is invariably – the robot.

M is for Marriage. Those of you still stuck in wedlock are defying ever-escalating divorce statistics – now 75 per cent in Moscow – and can be congratulated for practising an alternative lifestyle. Yet marriage itself, some believe, will split into four different categories later this century and will be undertaken as a long, erotic journey into self-fulfilment.

The first union will be the ice-breaker marriage, says Houston futurist Sandy Burchsted, drawing on "current megatrends", and is a five-year rehearsal of sex and relationships. The second union is the parenting marriage, which will focus on child-rearing, most probably in communal settings. The third is entitled, without irony, the self marriage and is "about consciously evolving yourself". You may think that three marriages is enough for one lifetime, but as people are expected to live to about 120 before the century's end, the Zimmer-framed optimists will press on to marriage number four, the soul-mate connection.

According to Burchsted, these couples will discover "marital bliss, shared spirituality, equal partnership and" – this one has certainly been a long time coming – "physical monogamy".

N is for Nanotechnology, the process of creating materials, objects, machines and even living tissues at the scale of one-billionth of a metre, roughly the size of an atom. Theoretically, these supercomputers on the end of a pin can replicate matter and enter your bloodstream to rebore your arteries or strip cataracts from your eyes.

It was always a wild card, but in June 1997 (four months after Dolly was cloned), Nature magazine published a description of the world's first nano machine. At a conference in Washington in July, three scientists from Canada's McGill University suggested that nanotechnology and cyberspace are two roads to the same destination: the merging of

mind and matter to form a new, post-human experience.

"These technologies will re-engineer communication," they enthused, "question the necessity of planning, force the end of work and create unified consciousness." This staggering hypothesis brings us to the next letter of the alphabet.

O is for Omega, the name applied to an expected evolutionary "quantum jump" by the Jesuit palaeontologist Teilhard de Chardin, who in the 1950s foresaw a world where each person would be linked empathetically to each other as occupants of one planetary body.

P is for the Penan people of Sarawak, who have one word for he, she and it – and six words for we. P is also for Paradoxes, fast becoming part of the scenery as we enter a volatile future: * High-tech gadgets promising to save time actually annihilate it. * As the world becomes globalised, so it becomes "Balkanised", with a greater clamouring for regional identity. * As information expands, our attention span contracts. * As the world shrinks, the role of ethics expands. * The more the world becomes one, the more its members are divided by wealth and access to knowledge.

These paradoxes can be internalised into a 21st-century condition, "Spasm" – the state of living with heightened feelings of contradiction, such as sane yet overwhelmed, fascinated yet bored, apathetic yet fully committed. The world is getting better and better, worse and worse, weirder and weirder, faster and faster.

Q is for the Question on everyone's lips – what lies beyond the information age? An escape from information, surely. Prominent US futurists proclaim an age of leisure. Japan's marketer of Microsoft, Kazuhiko Nishi, sees the 21st century as the age of the Internet civilisation, where lifestyle is "freed from the shackles of time" and humankind's creativity will further expand. His role? To point this out to the world.

Rolf Jensen, director of the Copenhagen Institute of Future Studies, foresees a limitless world of human potential, where hard work is replaced by hard fun, wars are bloodless, the loving family is reborn and the raw materials of tomorrow are stories, legends and myths: Greenland's main export will be fairytales; Australia's rural industry "will have been surpassed by Aborigines selling their legends". A change from having them stolen. These dreamy, Eurocentric scenarios, believable or otherwise, offer a therapeutic counterpoint to the dark, sweeping and all-too-convincing imaginings on the big screen (Matrix, Gattaca, Waterworld).

R is for Reading – forget it, see "E" – and for Revolutions, which seem to be accelerating in pace and implications: cybertech, teletech, robotech, biotech and nanotech, all of which are blending into a kind of grand unified revolution, known as the bionic convergence. In other words, you ain't seen nothing yet.

S is for Supermarkets, always open, family-friendly emporiums offering cloned and organic meat, leisure drugs, space age cosmetic surgery, Net connections and community bulletin boards to promote tantric singles nights and robot-swapping.

T is for Transgenics, which is engulfing agriculture at breakneck speed. From three

million hectares of plantings in 1996, transgenic crops in the US covered 20 million hectares within two years. In 1998, more than half the world's soya beans and one-third of corn crops contained genes spliced in from other life forms. While public protest has led to the termination of Monsanto's projected "terminator gene"– the creation of plants with sterile seeds, to enforce lifelong customer loyalty – there is still a risk that a handful of corporations will end up controlling the seed source of all major commercially planted crops on earth, which brings to mind another "T" – Totalitarianism.

U is for Unintended consequences, the omnipresent wild card (see "W") of all innovation. Cars create suburbia, air travel leads to mass tourism, Net porn incites streaming video (live TV on your laptop), encryption, credit card sales and the invention of Web animation. The heated campaign against genetically modified food is fuelled by the fear of unintended consequences.

V is for Viagra, the unintended consequence of which is its beneficial impact on the ecosystem. Roaming free, cheerful and erect are animals once slain for their supposed aphrodisiacal attributes.

W is for Wild cards, the out-of-the-blue, unforeseen paradigm busters that wreck scenarios grounded on realism: the Net, the return of the Messiah (or communism), a black plague, an asteroid strike, free energy, a widespread distaste for excessive wealth...

X is for Xanadu, home of the stately pleasure dome, decreed by Kubla Kahn in Coleridge's famous poem, where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree and "Alph, the sacred river, ran in caverns measureless to man". This sensuous sublimation of Victorian futurism was brought abruptly to earth by a knock on the poet's door from a local businessman. An omen? Xanadu is now a perfume.

Y is for the Year 2019, at which time, according to high-tech inventor Ray Kurzweil, creative collaborations between humans and machines will achieve critical respect. By 2029, these soulful robots of all the arts are striding triumphant across the cultural landscape, leaving humans as second fiddlers. Time mag's being of the year is ... Renaissance Robot.

Z is for Zero emissions, a "closed loop bio-system" method of manufacturing that nourishes the earth, produces an array of vital organic products (eg, beer) and offers future marketing oomph: "Get pissed, save the planet." Z is also for Zeppelins, re-emerging after the dark aftermath of the Hindenburg disaster as a safe, silent, non-polluting substitute for jets. Zeppelins and vertical take-off planes may yet confine today's sprawling airports to the dustbin of history. Along with humanity, perhaps, unless we create an alternative future.