



VIRTUAL FUTURES 2.0'11

Virtual Futures – Return of a Cult Cyber-Conference

As digital timers embedded within machines twitched towards the stroke of midnight 1999 the world held its breath wondering what chaos would ensue in the very first second of the new millennium. Only those technologies that were created at the time of millennial angst were bestowed with mechanisms that could deal with the transition from one epoch to another. The so-called millennium 'bug' threatened those of us that relied on older technologies and who expected the world to literally stop counting.

Of course, the future is always virtual and many things that seem imminent or inevitable, such as Y2K, never actually happen. Fortunately our ability to survive the future is not contingent on our capacity for prediction though sometimes, on those much more rare occasions, something remarkable comes of staring the future deep in the eyes and challenging everything that it seems to promise. A role, which the Virtual Futures conference reacquired when it was 'rebooted' on the 18th–19th June 2011 with the support of the *Institute for Advanced Teaching and Learning (IATL), Student as Producer Research Grant*.

A Brief History

It was fifteen years ago when a group of renegade philosophers locked horns with the future based on the provocations of evidence provided by the emergence of the Internet. Their predictions were wild, exerted creative licence and were unfaithful to every academic discipline. Yet the University of Warwick events of 1994, 1995 and 1996 had a significant impact on the lives and careers of many of the speakers. Alumni include a range of successful columnists, journalists (for *The Telegraph*, *Guardian*, *Wired Magazine*), academics, artists, authors, designers, scientists, software developers and technology consultants.

The first *Virtual Futures* conference took place in 1994, and gained recognition almost instantly. Dubbed the "Glastonbury of cyberculture", the revolutionary event attracted speakers from many fields. Its popularity grew in 1995 and over 800 people attended. Soon it evolved into a unique, international event.

Virtual Futures was more than 'interdisciplinary,' and went beyond mere commentary: at *Virtual Futures*, the morphing of cultural space was accelerated by the head-on collision of science, theory, music, fiction, and multimedia.

Highlights from the 90's events included a live demonstration of computer controlled body parts, music and video-enhanced presentations from internationally renowned theorists, a series of films in the University of Warwick's Arts Centre cinema, talks from leading authorities on new scientific paradigms of complexity and non-linearity and guided tours of revolutionary virtual reality environments.

The presentations were unique as they were (some of the first) to be accompanied by films, music, slides and digital graphics with every speaker offering new and exciting perspectives on what may await us in the near future. *Virtual Futures* was a catalytic site for the meeting and cross-fertilisation of new ideas, new media and new technologies.

In association with:

Aim

When the *Virtual Futures* conference returned to Warwick, on the 18th and 19th June 2011, it aimed to reconnect audiences with one of the most important intellectual and cultural developments of our times – the technological extension of the human condition, and served to raise awareness about the continuing significance of the issues addressed by the original conferences.

Entering the second decade of the new millennium, it is clear that a lot has happened since the events of the mid-90's. *Virtual Futures '2.0'* aimed to chart the technological advancements, which have led to transformations in the social and cultural environment. It's unique retrospective approach served as a platform from which the developments of the last fifteen years could be critiqued and analysed. The 2011 revival enabled attendees to reflect on lessons learned in the last fifteen years but more importantly, explore new grounds and discover the potential held by advancements in society, technology, art and politics over the next fifteen.

The conference was organised in collaboration with the University of Warwick's *Institute for Advanced Teaching and Learning*, the *Centre for the History of Medicine* and the *School of Theatre, Performance and Cultural Studies* as well as *Humanity+ UK* creating interest from both across the University and nationwide.

Research Outcomes - The Future is Not What it Used to Be

On a spring evening in May 1995 hundreds of people huddled together in a lecture hall at the University of Warwick for a chance to witness the Australian performance artist, Stelarc, who believed that soon we could not only take out natural organs and install improved artificial ones but also add a third hand and an extra ear. The interest this audience had in the speaker went beyond freak-show voyeurism to an actual concern with the future of their human-form. Those who had gathered together were told how their body was soon to become obsolete and it was time to question whether, “a bipedal, breathing body with binocular vision and a 1400cc brain is an adequate biological form. It cannot cope with the quantity, complexity and quality of information it has accumulated; it is intimidated by the precision, speed and power of technology and it is biologically ill-equipped to cope with its new extraterrestrial environment.”

This 'extraterrestrial' environment was 'cyberspace,' better known as 'the internet.' Many of the Q&A and panel sessions during the rest of this weekend were dominated by this new idea of the 'virtual,' a space that a large majority of the audience did not believe existed. It is hard to imagine now, but in the mid-90s the internet was yet to enter the public consciousness, email was used little outside of universities, web browsers were still relatively new and the idea of ordering a pizza online, as attendees were told they would be able to do, was considered ludicrous. As for the University of Warwick, it had only 3,000 points of JANET access – compare that now with over 20,000 students and staff all with WiFi Hotspot access.

Surrounding this topic were a series of seemingly revolutionary statements made by many of the speakers regarding, “open systems, information systems, which would know no boundaries of law or privacy [and] there is nothing which human beings can do about it.” But these seemingly absurd notions have now, in the second decade of the new millennium, become accepted truths, you only have to look at the current WikiLeaks phenomenon, the work of hacker collective – Anonymous, and more recently the Ryan Giggs Twitter debacle to see that 'information systems knowing no boundaries of law' may not have been such a ludicrous idea. Then, when we begin to look at our digitally cluttered lives: at the number of unread e-mails, at the influx of Twitter information and the always-on notification nightmare that is Facebook, it has suddenly become easy to accept that a couple of upgrades to the body and brain would not go a miss.

In association with:

VIRTUAL FUTURES 2.0'11

The VF revival highlighted how, in the last 15 years, we have become the cultural engineers of our own obsolescence. This possibility was alluded to by the 1995 theme, 'CyberEvolution' or 'a consciously driven evolution' of society led by the counter-culture movement of 'cyberpunk' and encouraged by the web. An array of world-renowned speakers and artists including Stelarc, Dr. Dan O'Hara, Dr. Rachel Armstrong, Dr. Richard Barbrook and James Flint, returned to the University of Warwick, 16 years after appearing at VF 95. Professor Steve Fuller, Professor Andy Miah and Mark Fisher questioned how we will move forward in our evolution at a time of ever improving technology and WMC's own Professor Alan Chalmers and Professor Jeremy Wyatt shared the latest innovations in digital technology. All of the Virtual Futures talks listed and more have been documented and made available via the Warwick Knowledge Centre (see Appendix).

But it was Pat Cadigan's 2011 talk that characterised new obsessive relationships with our technology, otherwise known as FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out), a heightened neurosis of missing out on something caused by social networking, "It's only a short step from FOMO to paranoia" states Cadigan. "If it exists someone is neurotic about it." Equally, leading cultural commentator Mark Fisher stated, "there's a sense that everything has changed but nothing's really happened [...] technological upgrades have taken the place of a kind of cultural development, and what I want to suggest, really, is that there is a correlation between these two things. What I've noticed over the last few months is a growing sense of a kind of digital communicative malaise; a sense that we're deep into this stuff and that we didn't necessarily know what we were getting into. It's like we're the subject of an experiment which no-one is consciously really conducting."

The *Virtual Futures* revival also helped to frame our 'relationship' with technology as one, not born of the creation of new tools, but in the democratisation of old tools. The most dangerous piece of technology is not always the largest or most expensive, but instead the most low cost and highly accessible. Indeed it was the tension between corporate high-tech and the appropriation of information technologies by counter-cultures that gave birth to the concerns of the original conferences. The technologies of the 'high-tech' industries of the mid-90's were accompanied with the 'cyber' prefixes which came to form concepts such as 'CyberNightclubs,' 'CyberLaw,' 'CyberDrugs,' and 'CyberCulture.' Today, this prefix has been dropped with the exception of terrorist investigators, information annalists, the military and the porn industry being the only collectives who still utilise the 'cyber' prefix. The revival of *Virtual Futures* attempted to reclaim a critical framework within which to analyse the web and the organisers from each decade, Dr. Dan O'Hara and Luke Robert Mason, are now working towards a publication that will study the epistemology of the 'cyber-' prefix charting it's various usage in across disciplines and it's seeming disappearance in fields such as art, philosophy and culture.

Whereas the mid-90s events were about emergence and understanding of the symbiotic relationship between man and machine, the 2011 theme, "Digital Natives: Fear of the Flesh?" was about acceptance. Children born today are being born into increasingly synthetic worlds of virtual interaction, virtual products (MP3s etc.) and virtual transactions. A reality that would be fitting of a William Gibson novel in which 'consensual hallucination' has overtaken and where we would happily purchase small representations of physical objects (such as iTunes albums) – a concept only aided by a shared social acceptance. The revival aimed to help attendees see beyond this abstraction after all, when you are 'surfing' the net – lets not forget that you are actually slamming a couple of keys which sends machine code through wires. Despite the provocations raised by the revival of the conference, the question remains as to which technologies could conceivably 'Ctrl', 'Alt[er]', 'Enter' and perhaps even 'Delete' our bodies over the next 15 years.

In association with:



VIRTUAL FUTURES 2.0'11

Legacy

In addition, and enabled by the support of the *Institute of Advanced Teaching and Learning* grant, the *Virtual Futures* website (<http://virtualfutures.co.uk>) is now home to an archive of over 300 web-pages of cyber-culture papers and abstracts – one of the largest digital archives outside of CTheory.net. The future of this site includes plans for a full archive of videos from the 1995 *Virtual Futures* conference, which are steadily being tracked down and digitised. In addition the organisers are working towards a series of seminars utilising the *Virtual Futures* themes. These are planned for 2012/13, along with the publication of a book serving as an update on the 1998 Broadhurst & Cassidy publication, *Virtual Futures: Cyberotics, Technology and Post-Human Pragmatism*.

In association with:



Appendix

The conference gained significant press coverage including interviews with BBC World Service's Click Radio Show, BBC Radio Coventry and Warwickshire, Motherboard.tv, Warwick Knowledge Centre, Machine Starts Blog, Humanity Plus Magazine and photos featured in Wired Magazine. A full list of media has been provided below:

Virtual Futures – Official Website

<http://virtualfutures.co.uk>

Official Virtual Futures Website and Archive.

Warwick Knowledge Centre – Virtual Futures [ARTICLES/ AUDIO/ VIDEO]

<http://go.warwick.ac.uk/knowledge/themes/virtualfutures/>

In June 2011, Virtual Futures returned to the University under the banner Virtual Futures 2.0'11. The event was organised by digital media artist, and current Warwick student, Luke Robert Mason, and the Knowledge Centre was on hand to video the talks and interview the speakers.

We have a video of performance artist Stelarc's talk, as well as audio from a range of the talks. Professor Kevin Warwick spoke about his experiments with cyborgs and Pat Cadigan looked at how far we have come since the original Virtual Futures conferences.

BBC Click – BBC World Service, 7:32PM Tue, 14 Jun 2011 [AUDIO]

http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/p00h4vs8/Click_14_06_2011/

Luke Robert Mason and Rachel Armstrong report on Virtual Futures, which has been described as the Glastonbury rock festival of cyberculture.

BBC Coventry and Warwickshire [AUDIO]

<http://virtualfutures.co.uk/2011/11/25/bbc-cov-warks2011/>

15 years after Eric Cassidy, Otto Imken and Dan O'Hara appear on BBC Local Radio talking about Virtual Futures 1995, Dr. Dan O'Hara returns with 2011 organiser Luke Robert Mason to discuss the revival of the cult cyber conference and their predictions for the future on the BBC Coventry and Warwickshire Annie Othen Breakfast Show.

Motherboard.tv – Stelarc: An Alternate Evolutionary Structure [ARTICLE]

<http://motherboard.vice.com/2011/6/23/stelarc-an-alternate-evolutionary-structure>

Billed as 'the Glastonbury rock festival of cyberculture,' the only mud to be found at the Virtual Futures 2.0 conference, which took place last week at Warwick University, was made on campus mainframes.

Wired – Stelarc in a feature on BioArt [IMAGE]

<http://www.andymiah.net/2011/07/28/wired/>

Wired magazine recently published one of Professor Andy Miah's Virtual Futures pictures of Stelarc in a feature on BioArt.

Humanity Plus Magazine – Back to the (Virtual) Future [ARTICLE]

<http://hplusmagazine.com/2011/06/25/back-to-the-virtual-future/>

Published: June 25, 2011

Professor Andy Miah's Album of Photos from Virtual Futures (Flickr) [IMAGE]

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/andymiah/sets/72157626884563745/>

Virtual Futures 2.0 Alum, all photos are under a creative commons licence and can be used by IATL or the University of Warwick.

In association with: