

Larrs' Ghost

Larrs' ghost still haunts his make-believe world; even now he warms his feet on the glittering sands, dodging the bubbling surf like a child. So long as power is ensured to the computer and bio-interface, Larrs' intricate program will reveal his carefully-constructed world to anyone who wishes to enter it.

Many times I sought him out and begged him to return to the real world. Here he looked well. His eyes were bright and his skin was pink and youthful; the real world had clouded his eyes and sallowed his skin.

"This is my world", he once replied with pride. We sat at the beach-head, warmed by a mellow sun. The burnished disc of the sea stretch to the horizon and the mare's-tails of summer clouds swept the blue sky overhead.

"Larrs, please listen to me. Your body in the real world is slowly deteriorating. As your doctor, I must advise you to return to it".

"Why? For my spirit to die along with that miserable shell? Here, my soul has freedom", he said sharply.

"Freedom until your body dies of neglect", I argued. "Then what is there to interact with your carefully-programmed world"?

His eyes pierced mine with such intensity that for the first time I sensed his unreality. It frightened me.

"Look around you, my friend, and what do you see? A beach, clean, uncluttered". He stepped forward and scooped a handful of water from a nearby rock-pool. "The sea is clear, unpolluted. Why is this so? I know as well as you that in the real world we are in some grubby little room in a decaying building, in the middle of a stinking city, but in my world I can set things right; the interaction between my mind and the computer enables me to set things right".

"It is nothing more than escapism, Larrs. Like watching television, fleeing the real world".

"It is more than that, my friend. Remember long ago when I first started this project"?

Your enthusiasm was infectious, but you saw it as nothing more than another form of entertainment or educational tool; experiencing images, sounds, smells directly in the mind, generated by a cold and logical machine".

"I was wrong", he enthused. "It is more than entertainment. It is a new life in a new world, limited only by my imagination. The computer not only

stimulates my mental senses to tell me what I should see and hear and smell, but I tell it. Imagination becomes an apparent reality. Because of the bio-interface directly to my senses, I cannot tell it from reality — but I can remove the darker aspects of the real world".

It was realistic. I remember shaking Larrs' hand on first greeting him. It was firm and warm. I had difficulty imagining that grubby little room in which both our bodies reclined on couches. With sensors

by Chris Kelly

wired to our heads we looked like futuristic Hydra.

"Yet how can all these images and sounds be stored in a limited computer memory"? I had asked him long ago. "Not all parts of the image are stored", he had replied, "just the required train of impulses to trigger the mind into reconstructing the images. For example, one does not memorise a scene point-by-point like a television picture. Only key parts of it are remembered. The human mind fills in the rest of the detail".

This seemed true. I remember testing his theory by visualising the scene behind me — a small hill surrounded by trees and a small log cabin tucked in at one side. When I turned and looked at it critically, I realised that the components were standard images drawn from my memory, put together rather like an identi-kit picture. A few distinguishing features had been added to make the scene individual.

To me it was little more than a technological trick, like sitting in a cinema and pretending that the world outside does not exist. Eventually all good films end.

You cannot hide forever, Larrs. Your body needs attention, exercise. Do you realise that you are being fed intravenously? You're loading the responsibility of your body on to others".

"Then kill it", he snapped with such ferocity that I almost shrank back from my old and trusted colleague. The surf hissed through the sand. I told myself it was not real, but to Larrs it was. As I returned to the real world, I began to seriously suspect his sanity.

Later that day I did a run-through the regular medical checks on Larrs. He lay on a couch, his senses isolated from the room around him. They were

responding to the brighter music returned from the computer by his side.

Apart from the sensors wired to the bio-interface, other electrodes monitored his bodily functions. A drip was suspended above the couch feeding him. My machines told me of his weakening condition. For the first time I contemplated removing him from the computer without his consent, but fate acted before I did. Larrs' body went into violent spasms, then lay still. The cardiograph read-out dropped to zero.

I tried to revive him, but failed. His body was now indeed a miserable shell, empty and dead. For a while I sat mourning the loss of a friend and a brilliant mind, but eventually told myself that Larrs' mind had been lost to his computerised world long ago.

Reluctantly, I removed the electrodes from his head and placed them by the computer, which buzzed faintly as though searching the loops and subroutines, looking for external impulses with which to react. I reached out to switch it off, but on a moment's impulse checked the movement. I felt as though Larrs himself was forbidding me.

Although Larrs' main program was permanently stored on disc, its interpretation of his make-believe world would be lost forever if I now switched it off, thus erasing the working store. For months, the computer had detected the signals from his brain, interpreted them and restructured the basic program to feed back the images of Larrs' imagination. It occurred to me that even though Larrs was dead, his world still existed.

There and then I decided to re-enter Larrs' world to observe the artefacts of his mind. What could I learn of a dead man from the structure and contents of a world as he saw it?

I lay on the couch, disregarding the sombre fact that Larrs' lifeless body lay beside me. Within seconds, I entered the self-induced trance necessary to isolate myself from the real world and to open my mind with the probing sensors, interacting with the long and complex program Larrs had devised.

I found myself once more at the beach-head. It was day and comfortably warm. Gulls and kittiwakes wheeled and screeched in the sky above the distant cliffs. Close by the hill was the cabin, the only building in sight. Smoke curled from the chimney as though someone were home. I decided that the cabin would tell

me more of Larrs than anything else and went in.

Inside, I found spacious rooms filled with simple furniture. I could hear music, Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade* — Larrs' favourite — but no source that I could detect. I smelled cooking, and I made my way into the kitchen, I noticed a fireside rocking chair, rocking slightly as though someone had recently left it. A wholesome-smelling stew was simmering gently in a large pot on the stove and I was puzzled to see the pine table set for two.

The outside door suddenly opened and I jumped back as a man entered carrying logs for the fire. He stopped and stared.

"Larrrs", I gasped aloud without realising. My mind raced feverishly until I convinced myself that this was probably only an image; an echo of a dead man, reconstructed in response to my brain impulses. Then he spoke to me:

"Welcome, my friend doctor. As you can see, I still do the daily chores I choose; the homely chores, you understand, that add to the realism". He beckoned to the table. "Food"?

"You expected me"? I ventured to ask, wondering what kind of interactive answer the computer would generate.

"I felt something had happened", he replied simply. "A kind of snapping

of strings, a sense of release". Again his eyes probed mine.

I grasped his shoulders, firmly. "Larrrs, your body is dead. You died not half-an-hour ago".

He sagged slightly, and sat down slowly. Presently he looked up at me. "Only my body died, doctor. Please, when you return to the real world, do not switch the computer off".

Larrrs still haunts his make-believe world; he still warms his feet on the sand and dodges the unpredictable surf. So long as power is ensured to the computer, anyone can don the electrodes and interact with his spirit. □

