

## ***Sometimes Dreams Can Be Nightmares***

By Gary Thomas

**“If you can dream it, you can do it,” said Walt Disney.**

**I recently spent a couple of days at Walt Disney’s supreme dream: Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow. Known as EPCOT, it is a horticultural wonder of the world where globalism, science and technology fuse together into an interactive vision of the future.**

**Over 650 professionals make-up the horticultural staff of Walt Disney World Resorts. A beautiful array of strategically placed plants is staged each year: 8500 interior plants, 3500 plant species, 5000 hanging baskets, over 3 million bedding plants and annuals, nearly 13,000 roses, over 4 million shrubs, and 6000 trees. In short, the backdrop for the world’s best-known theme park is as colorful as it is imaginative.**

**At EPCOT inventions and innovations are proposed as answers to improving our lives: global communication networks by AT&T, wearable computers, interactive games and programs, home entertainment light and sound, high definition television, experimental staple foods development, cognitive investigation, genetic engineering, evolutionism, dinosaurs, and even the philosophy of Ellen Degeneress.**

**The electric Segway Human Transport ([www.segway.com](http://www.segway.com)) was ridden-out at EPCOT’s Innoventions as the “evolution in mobility.” A futuristic one person urban scooter, it moves at speeds up to 9 MPH, and was developed to reduce automobile congestion and pollution in the big city.**

**Projected upon a large screen was the latest in voice recognition software from IBM called ViaVoice ([www-3.ibm.com/software/speech](http://www-3.ibm.com/software/speech)). Instead of clicking the mouse, simple voice commands can now run many of your computer applications and can surf the Internet. You can even tell ViaVoice to translate documents into foreign languages. Not quite Star Trek quality yet, voice recognition software appears to be getting better and more accurate.**

**“How much is that robot in the window?” Inside a miniature white picket fence, Innoventions’ demonstrator showed us what her robot doggie could do. AIBO ([www.us.aibo.com](http://www.us.aibo.com)) is likely the most advanced pet robot on the market. Made by Sony Corporation, AIBO is an acronym for Artificial Intelligence and roBot. According to Sony’s website ‘aibo’ also means “companion” or “pal” in Japanese.**

**AIBO ERS-220A utilizes 16 motors that “enables it to walk, play soccer, sit, lie down, and right itself.” AIBO is said to “express a wide variety of emotions (happiness, sadness, fear, dislike, surprise, anger) and instincts (play, search, hunger, sleep), and entertain you. With its hearing, communication abilities, and touch sensors, AIBO is able to interact in a variety of autonomous ways and also perform very useful tasks.”**

**Robo-Pup was entertaining to observe as it danced its way around the pen. However, as with technology in general there is a potential dark side to AIBO. In fact, two days spent at EPCOT reminded me clearly that earth has some troubling days ahead in the not-so-distant future.**

**The EPCOT demonstrator proceeded to explain to us that AIBO was a wonderful companion for elderly people. If you think about it, these are disturbing words. Have we come so far that our aging parents must now suspend belief in reality in order to experience companionship?**

**Society once viewed the elderly who played with dolls as a sign of senility and mental infirmity. Now their children may be encouraging such demeaning behavior if companies like Sony can sell them on the idea that artificial intelligence can imitate life-like qualities. Not to mention the fact, children have a duty to honor parents; it is a cop-out to substitute the supposed companionship of a robot pet for the companionship children owe to their parents.**

**But wait a minute! How can an electrically wired AIBO bring true companionship? Doesn't emotion and instinct derive from animate conscious life possessing mind and body? If true, fundamental needs like love and companionship cannot be fulfilled by machine or any mechanical contrivance.**

**Nevertheless, Sony's philosophy appears to be that AIBO is more than just a toy. On their website ([www.robotbooks.com/sony\\_aibo.htm](http://www.robotbooks.com/sony_aibo.htm)) Sony is insistent: “But AIBO is not a toy! He is a true companion with real emotions and instincts. With loving attention from his master, he will develop into a more mature and fun-loving friend as time passes.”**

**Such concepts challenge the core of who and what we are as people. Our worldview becomes merely mechanistic, naturalistic and devoid of spiritual quality. Perhaps the words of Woody, the digitized Disney character from *Toy Story* are appropriate for Sony's technocrats. To Buzz Light Year Woody explained, "You are a Toy. You are a child's play thing." Buzz didn't get it when he responded: "You are a sad, strange little man."**

**“Sad” and “strange” may soon be how those of us who believe in the spiritual quality of life will be described. The spiritual dimension is today**

being challenged on every front. Not only AIBO which may seem trivial until seen as part of the whole, other voices redefining spirit are prevalent. (For an in depth study of AIBO see *The March of the Robot Dogs*, by Dr. Robert Sparrow, <http://csu.edu.au/faculty/arts/cappe/PDF%20Files/Sparrow1.pdf>).

Public television's recent three part mini series, *Inside the Animal Mind* ([www.pbs.org/wnet/nature/animalmind](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/nature/animalmind)) attempts to blur the lines between human and animal consciousness. Probing questions are pursued like: Are animals self-aware? Do they comprehend their own mortality? Can they understand abstract concepts? All of which once were thought to be distinctive to dichotomous (i.e., consisting of body and spirit) human beings.

Neurologist Joseph LeDoux was scientific consultant for part II of *Inside the Animal Mind*. His recent book, *Synaptic Self: How Our Brains Become Who We Are* reduces human nature to the tiniest of spaces between brain cells known as synapses. Such synaptic spaces determine the networking between brain cells which is "the means by which most of what the brain does is accomplished." LeDoux's synaptic theory bypasses altogether the need for immaterial spirit. The immaterial is unnecessary because the mental trilogy (cognition, emotion, and motivation) is explained largely in terms of complex physical molecules.

If all we are is reduced to the material, is it any wonder that Sony's first step towards artificial intelligence is marketed as a "true companion." No difference between man and machine because artificial intelligence software and wire can mimic life? No difference between man and animal because synapses and complex protein molecules explain both comprehensively?

We are positioned on the vortex of a technological and philosophical revolution the likes of which even Disney couldn't fathom. His motto, "If you can dream it, you can do it," may bring more than humankind has bargained. The erasure of the spiritual nature of man is now taking place by means of high technology and low philosophy. Dreams can sometimes flower and come true, yes. Nightmares on the other hand have equal if not more potent opportunity to thrive should we fail to recognize them as weeds in our garden. To uproot these false ideas with tenacious spirit is a goal worthy of the fight. After all, reality demands nothing less.