THIS PERVERSIVE DAY
The Potential and Perils of Pervasive Computing

Edited by
Jeremy Pitt

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Preface

Christ, Marx, Wood, and Wei
Led us to this perfect day.
Marx, Wood, Wei, and Christ;
All but Wei were sacrificed.
Wood, Wei, Christ, and Marx
Gave us lovely schools and parks.
Wei, Christ, Marx, and Wood,
Made us humble, made us good.

—child’s rhyme for bouncing a ball

How It All Began

The dry story: In 2008, The European Union’s Future and Emerging Technologies (FET) programme launched a proactive research initiative into Pervasive Adaptation. One of the projects funded under that initiative was the Coordination Action Panorama. One of the partners in that Coordination Action was Imperial College London. One of the responsibilities of that partner was to lead the workpackage on Public Dissemination, to bring the emerging technology of pervasive and adaptive computing to the attention of a wider audience, in particular EU citizens. One of the deliverables of that workpackage was a ‘popular science’ book, exploring and explaining those pervasive computing technologies.

This is that book.

How It (Really) All Began

The personal story: My mother gave me her copy of Ira Levin’s 1970 novel This Perfect Day to read. She also lent it to my brother. It became some-
thing of a family book, and the original copy something of a bone of con-
tention, though I have conceded the argument since I started looking after,
in perpetuity, Mr Haldane’s First Edition. (As an aside, with the exception
of the one following, all quotations, section and chapter epigraphs are taken
New York: Random House.)

This Perfect Day is, by Wikipedia’s description, a ‘heroic science fiction
novel of a technocratic utopia’; or, by the description on the back cover of
the 1971 paperback edition (New York: Fawcett Crest):

Tomorrow’s world is a place where computers rule, where
monthly treatments keep people docile, where sex is pro-
grammed weekly, and where death occurs at the age of sixty-
two in the interest of efficiency . . .

This Perfect Day is the story of a citizen of the future
in conflict with a world of nightmare . . .

(This Perfect Day, back cover)

Now read on, as they say. (Don’t read any more of the wiki page, it contains
spoilers. One thing we have tried to do in this book, although there are
hints, is to not give anything away.)

Anyway, the novel had a profound influence on me, as it does on most
people who read it, and I have re-read it many times. The social questions
it raises are timeless, and at its heart there is a rather good story, very
well told. The content and the themes stayed with me ever since, even
after many years as a computing and information technology professional,
until the Panorama Coordination Action gave me the opportunity to do
something I’d been thinking about for a very long time: to work on a book
that evaluated the advances in computing technology and the society in
which we live against the fictional description of the computer antihero and
the utopian society described in the novel. In particular, I had in mind a
book that explored the potential of the remarkable advances in computing
since the novel was written, and the ways in which it can be used, either
to make life wonderful, or to make life unbearable.

This is that book . . .

Dramatis Personae, ‘Glossary’
You do not need to have read the novel to appreciate the important infor-
mative message of this book (although, if you have not read it, you have
deprived yourself of one of life’s small joys; but the novel was re-printed in
2010 and you don’t have to continue depriving yourself any more).

While the most pertinent features of the ‘technocratic utopia’ are described in Chapter 1, along with an analysis of the computing and communication technology used to implement ‘the place where computers rule’, the following ‘glossary’ is enough to familiarise the reader with the terms of reference of the novel:

*Li RM35M4419* (‘Chip’): the main protagonist of the novel.

*Anna SG38P2823* (‘Lilac’): the love interest.

*King, Snowflake, Dover, Papa Jan, Julia*: other minor characters.

*Uni, UniComp*: the ‘bad guy’, the omnipotent, omniscient computer in charge of all personal and social decision-making.

*Family, The*: everyone on the planet belongs to one big family.

*Adviser*: personal counsellor and confessional; everybody has one.

*Telecomp, comptroller*: portable computer, used by advisers to connect wirelessly to UniComp, uses keyboard or voice input.

*Classification*: the job description that people are assigned to. Adviser is an example of a classification. Chip is a geneticist.

*Treatment*: a cocktail of chemotherapeutic drugs administered monthly.

*Nameber*: Each family member has a name, of which there are four for boys (Li, Jesus, Karl, Bob) and four for girls (Anna, Mary, Peace, Yin), and an alphanumeric string (e.g. SG38P2823), making a nameber.

*Bracelet*: worn by each member of The Family, with their nameber inscribed on it.

*Scanner*: ubiquitous sensor device for requesting permission to access resources, locations, etc. by touching the scanner with the bracelet.

*Coveralls*: identical, unisex, functional clothing with only minor variations (e.g. a red cross for medical staff).

*Totalcakes, cokes*: identical (Mc)food consumed at every meal.

Sounds marvellous, doesn’t it? Now look out of the window. No bracelets around wrists, but mobile phones clamped to ears, recording GPS data continuously, without, until recently, our knowledge (thanks, Steve). No scanners, but if you have the (mis)fortune to live in London, CCTV cameras everywhere. Access control through radio-frequency identification (RFID) tags embedded in identity cards for travel, work, and so on. A wander around my neighbourhood reveals some restaurants without yellow arches, so there is some variation in the food still. It also reveals several yellow signs saying ‘Did you see this murder?’, so in London, at least, we’re still cheerfully stabbing each other, implying we’re not one big happy family
either ... Well, you get the point. You can compare the novel's vision and your own experience, and see which is a feature of our world and which is not. This is what this book aims to do, but with the computer technology, by evaluating that technology in its socio-technical context, in the novel and in reality.

Summary
I have six fond hopes for this book. Firstly, that the interested reader will find the contributed chapters as interesting, informative, engaging, insightful and – yes – as provocative as I did. Imagine yourself in a great socio-technological bazaar and, for a few hours or more, marvel and potter as I did, and I'm sure you'll confirm there is something of surpassing interest in every chapter.

Secondly, I hope that anyone who has not read This Perfect Day and, having read our book, afterwards reads the novel and gets as much enjoyment out of it as I did (indeed I envy you the pleasures to come). Thirdly, that anyone who has already read This Perfect Day and, having read our book, will remember what a stunning literary achievement that novel was, and how well it has withstood the test of time. Fourthly, having at least read our book, that technologists and computer engineers take social responsibility for their inventions and designs; that policy-makers use evidence-based policy-making when using technology to formulate solutions to social problems; and that citizens everywhere put pressure on scientists and politicians to behave this way. It can be a perfect day, but let’s make sure that it is on our terms.

Fifthly, I’d like to think that, if he read this book, Ira Levin would approve. And finally, I hope my mum likes it. It is a small way of saying ‘thank you’ for the kindness of giving me the novel to read in the first place, and much much more besides.

Jeremy Pitt
London, December 2011
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“Thanks. Thanks very much. Thank Julia too.”

THIS PERFECT DAY, p. 237

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