

Editorial

Of Christians and Information Technology

In E A Nesbitt's classic children's story a group of children discover a wonderful creature in a sand pit. 'It' is the last of the *psammeads* or sand fairies. Like the rest of its kind, It could grant one wish a day. Unfortunately all the wishes seem to go wrong. Furthermore the wishes vanish at sunset.

Driven by the entertainment industry, virtual reality offers a degree of wish-fulfilment to challenge the original *psammead*. Merely by turning on his home computer, the adolescent male can become anything from a Roman general to a starship captain. Virtual reality is also creeping into education. Instead of merely reading about life in the Middle Ages, today's children can 'experience' it through computer simulations of medieval castles. Other programs simulate laboratory experiments so that students can 'learn' scientific method without recourse to time-consuming and costly practical work! Simulations appear more interesting and attractive than the real thing. They offer a comforting appearance of control in a highly complex world.

IT also offers a leap forward in information storage and retrieval. Home computers are now capable of storing entire libraries. However, the computer also transforms our reading habits. We no longer read patiently through a long text in the hope of gleaning relevant information. Instead we do a keyword search and jump to the most relevant section. From there, we follow hypertext links in whatever direction takes our fancy. Reading is no longer a linear process.

The new technology promises new ways of looking at and knowing the world—ways that break with the word-dominated traditions of the Academy. Furthermore IT offers its own distinctive way of interpreting reality. The sharp distinction between hardware and software could have been tailor-made to revitalise the Cartesian distinction between body and mind. This is the metaphysical assumption underlying Tipler's speculative reinterpretation of resurrection as an eschatological rerunning of all our programs. We may dismiss it as naive and far-fetched but it is propagated subliminally by one of the most influential industries of the modern world.

IT's promise to make our wishes come true seem to reflect the story of the sand fairy. Wish fulfilment has a bad habit of evaporating at sunset, leaving us with problems more complex than before. However, our response to these challenges should be neither a Luddite rejection of the new technology nor ostrich-like complacency. Rather, the challenge of IT calls for a constructive critical exploration of **all** the issues it raises.