

# Tomorrow World

By ANDREW STEPHENS

**T**he future is here and it's not what we thought it would be—it rarely is. But this doesn't stop us wondering what 2007 will dish up. What new fads, trends, terminologies and complete rubbish will sweep us off our feet and take the money out of our wallets? Andrew Stephens does a spot of trend-spotting.

## PEDALPUSHERS

It's starting to sink in that oil is running out. The cost of running our greenhouse-gas-spewing cars will continue to rise, and oil companies think they have us hooked. But anyone who's seen the recent documentary *Who Killed the Electric Car?* will not be counting on car manufacturers to bring us a sustainable, friendly alternative to petrol-fuelled vehicles. Maybe electronics companies are worth watching in 2007—and worth haranguing—to see if they bypass the cartels, make their own electric vehicles and make a fortune. But for the moment, pedal-power is on the rise: Victoria's Cycling Promotion Fund says bicycle sales in Australia have nearly doubled since 1998. Over the past four years, more than a million bicycles have been sold every year, exceeding the number of new cars sold.

Harry Barber, general manager of Bike Victoria, says the worst thing we can do is panic about the warnings we're getting on climate change.

"We need to just get on and do sensible, practical day-to-day things, like getting the kids to ride to school. If you don't like seeing the snow disappearing off the top of Kilimanjaro, get the kids to get themselves to school."

Barber predicts that 2007 will see a huge turnaround in children riding to school: from 20 per cent back up to 80 per cent, where it was 30 years ago. He says parents are seeing clear benefits: fitness, fighting obesity, saving money and general wellbeing—and children under 12 can ride on footpaths.

The Walking School Bus and Cycling School Bus initiatives, active in more than 58 Victorian councils, are also getting more children walking and riding to school, instead of being driven.

Expect pressure to mount for Melbourne cyclists' favourite drag, Beach Road, from St Kilda to Mentone, to be closed to cars on Sunday mornings. Also turning up the volume: debates about "bike rage" and cycling etiquette on talkback radio.

## LIVELONGERS

With growing numbers of older people forming the biggest bulge in projected population statistics, there's a big push to make middle age the thing that happens in your 60s. And they're not going to want to be hampered by wrinkles, walking frames and reduced sex-drives. As everyone keeps on guzzling the latest antioxidant—green tea, resveratrol (the stuff from fungus-enriched grape skins that makes red wine so good for you) and blueberries—scientists are also rushing to get the fountain of youth gushing. Stem-cell research, drug developments and the possibility of nanotech therapies will vastly improve the outlook.

Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Technology Review recently examined emerging trends in biomedicine and genetics that will help extend our life spans. More research is pointing to the possibility of simply mutating a particular gene to slow down ageing.

"A few master genes are thought to regulate both the body's ability to fight off diseases associated with ageing and the extension of life span," the Review reports. ([technologyreview.com/special/living/index.aspx](http://technologyreview.com/special/living/index.aspx))

Meanwhile, KPMG demographer Bernard Salt forecasts that baby-boomers (whose mid-point age will be 54 in 2007) are going to add a new phase to the youth/middle-age/retirement cycle: he calls it pre-retirement.

"These are people redefining what it is to be 50-something," he says. "They're more active, fitter, healthier, do-it-for-me as opposed to do-it-yourself. These are people still employed and still very much engaged with the community, but conscious of moving into a different phase."

Technology's potential to provide healthier, longer life spans may be huge.

## POWERTRIPPERS

Green issues will be big in 2007 as the sudden surge in awareness about global climate change translates into demand for more action. Local and state governments—in the face of a dearth of national leadership on the issue—are starting to take climate action into their own hands. More people want green energy—wind, solar and biofuels—and the power companies are also taking notice and offering more electricity from renewable sources. If you think their "green products" are sus, the Australian Conservation Foundation, World Wide Fund

for Nature and the Total Environment Centre are onto them, ranking their "green" power products ([greenelectricitywatch.org.au](http://greenelectricitywatch.org.au)) and encouraging consumers to either convert to solar hot water/power themselves or buy the best-ranked green power from the providers.

Meanwhile, maverick fusion scientist Robert Bussard recently delivered a lecture for Google claiming that his research has come close to creating the world's first efficient fusion reactor: something small enough to sit in your garage, but which would provide enormous amounts of clean, sustainable energy. If successful, it would mean the end to oil and other fossil fuels—so let's see if someone this year funds Bussard to build a fully functioning facility. ([Search Bussard on video.google.com](http://Search.Bussard.on.video.google.com))

Watch out, too, for the anything-into-oil machines: they can turn almost any carbon-based material into oil. Next year should see several projects trying to convert research into a viable commercial reality. ([changingworldtech.com](http://changingworldtech.com))

## THE SINGULARITY

It might not hit us this year, but the Singularity is fast approaching. The Singularity is a phenomenon cited by many futurists (and sci-fi writers) as being the point at which exponential growth in technological progress becomes so rapid that we poor humans can't keep up with it: basically, too much information. Linked to developments in artificial intelligence, this means we may come to see the world around us as magic because robots will be way smarter than we are.

Already the self-replicating 3D printer—known as the RepRap Project—is on the way to becoming a force to disrupt traditional manufacturing: some say it will actually bring down global capitalism. In September, it successfully printed the first part of itself and is likely to eventually become fully self-replicating and able to create just about anything. ([reprap.org/](http://reprap.org/))

Meanwhile, British scientist Sir David King is flagging the need to look at legal rights for robots. Wired reports him as saying that if humans create sentient machines, we may have a duty to assign them the same freedoms and laws that we enjoy. So keep an eye on 2007's new mobile phones and laptops: they may start giving you some lip. ([blog.wired.com/gadgets/2006/12/british-govt-re.html](http://blog.wired.com/gadgets/2006/12/british-govt-re.html))

## TIMESQUEEZERS

With information overload growing every day, a range of businesses will pop up around the world—and hopefully in Australia—this year to help us outsource all those fiddly things we'd rather not deal with. In London, Babyplanners is taking over the hard slog from young career-focused parents who don't have the time to do all the planning for their baby's arrival: reading the books, booking the hospitals and medical checks, endless research and shopping. Other new businesses spotted by trend-watching website Springwise include: niche-market children's party-planners (everything you need for a kid's party comes in one box, with interesting themes); an online/mobile service that keeps track of things, including money, that you and your friends owe each other; and the Loc8tor, a mobile phone-sized tracking device that has tags you can attach to keys, wallets, pets and even children so you can find them quickly.

## GRAVANITY

The rather awkward hybrid of "graffiti" and "vanity", gravanity is ascribed to people who customise goods to get themselves or their names on display. The democratisation of celebrity, say the experts, is tempting us all to become exhibitionists, and new manufacturing techniques are making this kind of vanity production a viable commercial option.

What's the evidence? Marian Salzman, co-author of the book *Next Now: Trends for the Future*, points out that some perfume houses in the US, such as Creed, offer to customise, design and name perfumes to order. There is also the US toy company My Twinn ([mytwinn.com](http://mytwinn.com)), that allows punters to personalise a 50-centimetre doll to resemble any child aged between three and 12. The site offers a choice of 15 face shapes, four skin tones, eight eye colours, eight hair colours and 11 hair lengths and textures. Customers can also choose to have a professional stylist do the doll's hair or hand-paint details such as freckles or birthmarks.

In Britain, Cute Little Blokes ([cutelittleblokes.com](http://cutelittleblokes.com)) is targeting gay consumers who would like a caricature of themselves or a friend. Customers email a digital photograph and receive their portraits as digital files. Customers receive the finished

product in a number of files, including personalised mobile-phone wallpaper and a desktop background for the PC. They can also buy various versions of their portrait, dressed in different outfits or holding props. Likewise, the Norwegian company Norway Post (PersonligeFrimerker) recently launched personalised stamps that feature customers' own pictures. If none of that grabs you, how about a personalised song? One firm is now offering a "custom cut" of American pop singer Jessica Simpson's new single—one where you can insert your name into the lyrics and personalise the song.

## MEGALOPOLIS

Big urban planning projects used to be an '80s kind of thing, but they're on the rebound. The US is mad for it: in LA, for example, work is soon to start on a \$A1.273 billion Frank Gehry—who else?—Grand Avenue project, with 334,450 square metres of development and a 6.4-hectare park.

The return of "big urbanism" is not only evident in grand architectural plans—major local projects include the \$400 million-plus Convention Centre, moving the wholesale fruit and vegetable markets and revitalising central Geelong—but also in the rise of the "aerotropolis". It's the airport you never need to leave because it has everything (as Kath and Kel discovered at Tulla in an episode of *Kath and Kim*). The newest of these is Bangkok's long-awaited Suvamabhumi Airport (above), which has shopping malls, offices, hotels, hospitals, an international business centre, conference and exhibition spaces, warehouses and even a residential community. All it needs is a beach.

## GENERATIONAL CONGESTION

Grandparents spending hundreds on rock concerts; parents rarely stepping out of their hip jeans; teen girls stocking up on lipstick and perfume and amassing shoe collections that would be the envy of Carrie Bradshaw. All this is what Marian Salzman, a prominent New York trend-spotter and executive vice-president of the ad agency JWT, calls "the disappearing generation gap", and what other trend-spotters call generational congestion. Parents, she argues, are becoming more like "peerents", working through issues with their

children and sharing experiences in a form of collaborative parenting.

## ARRANGED MARRIAGES

Most people in the West frown on the idea of arranged marriages, but the times are slowly changing, according to Marian Salzman. Consider, she says, the popularity of the US TV show *The Bachelor*. In what is an arranged marriage in all but name, each season a bachelor is given the opportunity to select a mate from a specially screened group of eager partners.

Too harried for time to find suitable mates, Salzman predicts, Western singles will turn either to their extended families or to specialist marriage services to find their matches.

Cowardice will lead some of us to outsource break-ups as well as new romantic liaisons. At the end of last month, a German businessman called Bernd Dressler set up a new business offering to dump your partner for you by phone for £15 (\$37)—or in person for £35 (\$87).

## CROWDSOURCING

Next year, says Reinier Evers of Amsterdam's Trendwatching.com, will see the re-emergence of group decision-making power as organisations of all kinds try to harness the wisdom of crowds.

But if 2006 was the year in which DIY or home-made internet content triumphed over all its competitors in sites such as YouTube, 2007, says Evers, will see talented amateurs on the net demand payment for the stuff they produce.

Expect, he says, more and more user-generated content sites and ventures to move to a paid or revenue-sharing model in the next 12 months.

## UNPLUGGING

Unwiring and unplugging, says Salzman, will become the most fashionable thing in 2007. If you call designer Philippe Starck's Paris office before 1pm, she notes, you are told that this is their "thinking time", during which they do not take calls or respond to emails. Likewise, turning your phone off during lunch or not putting it on the table will be a real statement of your undivided attention. Almost anything can become an excuse for unplugging and switching off.