

What-If Machine Concocts Creative Premises

Science Fiction In the News

The predictions of science fiction writers coming true in today's world

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Back in the Sixties, you could watch shows like *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, in which a team of writers tried to produce good premises for comedy sketches. Now, though, this work will take place in the bowels of some server farm somewhere.

The **What-If Machine** is a computer science project to try to generate fictional "what-if" scenarios using artificial intelligence in five categories: Kafkaesque, alternative scenarios, utopian and dystopian, metaphors and Disney.

"WHIM is an antidote to mainstream artificial intelligence which is obsessed with reality," said Simon Colton, project coordinator and professor in computational creativity at Goldsmiths College, University of London. '

Some of the results are more bizarre than compelling, such as this gem from the alternative scenarios section:

"What if there was an old refrigerator who couldn't find a house that was solid? But instead, she found a special style of statue that was so aqueous that the old refrigerator didn't want the solid house anymore."

The European Union-funded project is very much in its infancy, but there are research teams around Europe working to make it a genuine creator of fiction for use in movies and video games.

At the University of Cambridge, UK, researchers are working to improve the web-mining system so the WHIM comes up with better ideas, while over at the University College in Dublin, Ireland, researchers are working to produce better irony and metaphorical insights.

Futurama fans may recall a similarly-named device.

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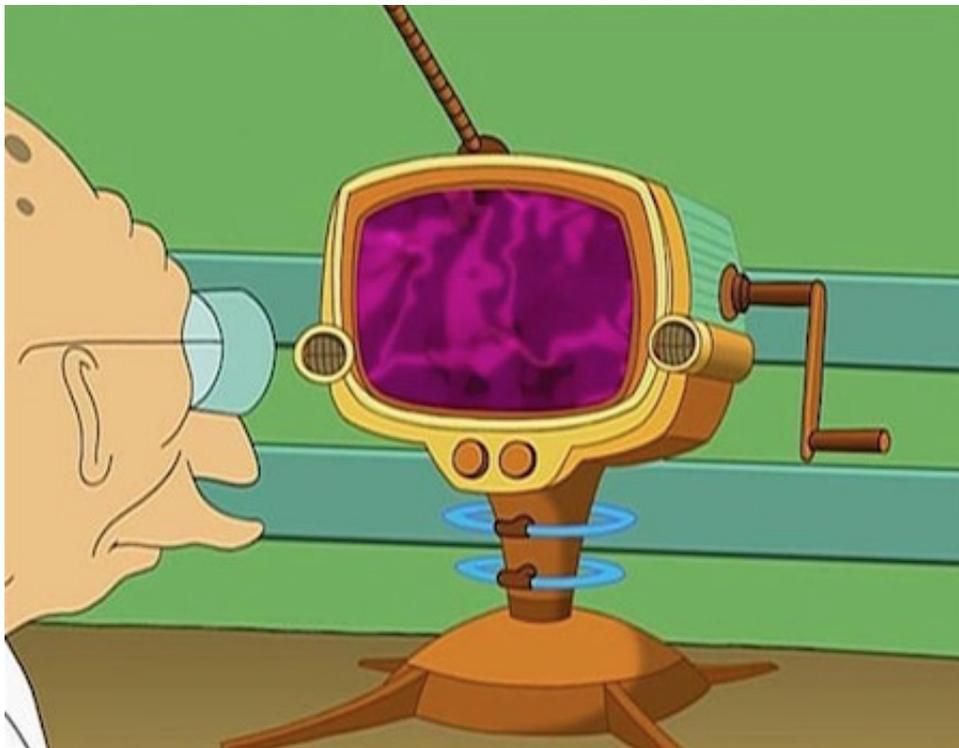
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(Futurama's What-If machine)

Don't forget the wonderful [novel-writing machine](#) from George Orwell's 1984:

Julia was twenty-six years old... and she worked, as he had guessed, on the novel-writing machines in the Fiction Department. She enjoyed her work, which consisted chiefly in running and servicing a powerful but tricky electric motor... She could describe the whole process of composing a novel, from the general directive issued by the Planning Committee down to the final touching-up by the Rewrite Squad. But she was not interested in the final product. She "didn't much care for reading," she said. Books were just a commodity that had to be produced, like jam or bootlaces.

Via [Factor-Tech](#) and [WHIM project](#).

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