

WHERE'S MY ROCKET JET PACK?

SO, here we are, midway through the Year 2000, a milestone year for futurists and numerologists alike. Is there anything we can say definitely at this point in time about the state of the world and humanity?

* That it's boffo entertainment to watch volunteers eat rats on a desert island for a TV game show.

* That SUVs really do run on gasoline, not moonbeams and good intentions, and gasoline can cost—get this—real money.

* And that, by happy coincidence, Texas has not just the busiest death penalty system in the country, but also the only flawless one.

These are all important to know, I guess. But I feel like something's missing. Here we are, in an almost new, barely used third millennium, and one question keeps nagging me. It's the 21st Century, people, and I wanna know: Where is my rocket jet pack?

If you grew up in the 1950s or 60s, I'm sure you want to know, too. All our favorite childhood TV shows, if they had even the slightest connection to science or space, would include scenes of some guy in a shiny silver jumpsuit shooting up into the air like a human geyser, then hovering and floating off to do "reconnaissance" or something. I could've cared less if he was getting his fusion-powered kite out of a carnivorous Martian elm tree, all I could think of was, "When I'm 16, I'll get my driver's license, but when I'm 25, I'm gonna get one of those."

What went wrong? What happened to the shiny new future we used to dream about, all fitted out in stainless steel and stretch fabric? (Well, thank heavens, we have invented some great stretch fabrics in recent years. Can't complain about that.)

Sure, we have personal computers now that can do all sorts of spiffy things, like download songs by Nine Inch Nails or Limp Bizkit without paying for them, and deliver instant messages full of junk mail, tepid jokes and Darwin Award candidates.

And we've made great strides in mapping the human genome, only to face the question of whether companies can patent specific DNA sequences. Tonight we can all rest easy, knowing that the US Patent Office will finally bring order to the lawless anarchy going on inside our nucleoplasm.

Do I sound a little peeved about the future that is now? Maybe I am. I feel let down, somewhat cheated. Why does the glorious new world of tomorrow, which the 21st Century was going to bring us, just feel like the world of yesterday with too much caffeine? Maybe it seems less impressive because technological changes and advances have been gradual, full of enough bugs and false starts to keep us skeptical. Put in geek terms, we could say the future is still in its Beta version. It hasn't been delivered complete and ready to use, the gift of some wise, advanced civilization. It's been coming piecemeal from places like Seattle, Austin and San Jose, with a big push around Christmas time and promoted in the "On the Scene" section of Playboy Magazine next to the remote-control humidors. Useful, maybe, but hardly inspiring.

And if somehow a more advanced Tomorrow were presented to us this very minute, how do you imagine we'd react? If technology-laden spaceships were to come down like Santa Claus and bestow upon us the bounty of their civilization, what would we do with it? First things first, we'd figure out how to use it to make money without working, to lose weight without exercising and to find authentic pictures of Jennifer Lopez naked. If all the new technology didn't fulfill the claims made in a typical TV infomercial, we'd probably make the spaceships take it back and warn them of the penalties for illegal dumping.

Tomorrow has always been where we deposit our hopes for a better world. These days, does anyone sit around imagining what life will be like in the year 2050? The year 2100? Overwork and information overload has already left us so exhausted and edgy that the idea of more innovation is distinctly unappealing. The future ain't what it used to be.

Maybe we don't deserve to ponder a bright, shiny future right now. We haven't earned it yet. Technology has evolved drastically, much more than human nature has been able to. We'll have to become a little less greedy and distractible before we can enjoy new visions of Utopia. To put it bluntly, we don't deserve to have our rocket packs yet.

Well, maybe most of us don't. But I do.

