Visions of the virtual: the role of computers and artificial intelligence in a selection of Australian young adult fiction

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ABSTRACT  Advances in computer technology over the last twenty years have resulted in a number of different visions of what it means to be real, and of what it means to be human. This paper will explore how computers and artificial intelligence are used as major themes in four Australian novels written for young adults: Gillian Rubinstein’s *Space Demons* trilogy — comprising *Space Demons*, *Skymaze* and *Shinkei* — and Michael Pryor’s *The Mask of Caliban*. In so doing, the paper will look at how these texts explore the relationship between increasingly developed technology and visions of a better world. By comparing a series of oppositions that occur in all four books, this paper will look at how the theme of technology is used to privilege particular values and to advocate particular beliefs.

INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to be human?
What does it mean to be real?
By what sorts of values should human beings live?
The capacity of computer technology to highlight these questions is an issue explored by many writers of fiction. This paper will examine how two authors in Australia have utilised the concepts of computers and artificial intelligence in some of their fiction for young adults. I will concentrate on Gillian Rubinstein’s *Space Demons* trilogy (*Space Demons*, *Skymaze* and *Shinkei*) and Michael Pryor’s novel, *The Mask of Caliban*, and will explore how certain ideological positions are advocated in the novels through the use of computer technology and artificial intelligence as themes.
Since about the mid 1980s, the exploration of ideology within texts has been a major trend in the analysis of children’s literature. Seminal academic texts in this area have been Peter Hollindale’s ‘Ideology and the Children’s Book’ (published in Signal, 1988) and John Stephens’ Language and Ideology in Children’s Literature. The analysis of ideology within children’s and young adult literature arises from the understanding that literature for young people seeks in some way to affect the lives of its young readers: to promote certain values and to privilege certain ways of seeing the world (see Stephens, 1992, p. 8). These values and ways of seeing the world can differ from text to text, and are not necessarily deliberate attempts by an author to socialise his or her readers. As Hollindale notes:

[W]riters for [young adults and] children (like writers for adults) cannot hide what their values are. Even if beliefs are passive and unexamined, and no part of any conscious proselytising, the texture of language and story will reveal them and communicate them. (Hollindale, 1988, 12–13)

In other words, ideology within a text is not always directly obvious. One of the ways in which it can be explored, however, is through looking at the binary oppositions a particular text sets up, such as truth/dishonesty, industriousness/laziness, humility/pride. Texts usually include several sets of binary oppositions and one item in each pair is invariably privileged, thus promoting a particular ideological position. The notion of binary oppositions within a text goes back at least as far as the work of the Russian Formalists, but has been concisely articulated by Umberto Eco in the context of his analysis of Ian Fleming’s novels (see Eco, 1979, especially pp. 147–155). This paper will look at three sets of binary oppositions that occur in Rubinstein’s trilogy and Pryor’s novel, in an attempt to answer the question ‘How is technology used as a theme in these four novels to advocate particular values?’. The three sets of oppositions to be examined are reality/illusion, community/isolation, and personal choice/external control.

The reality/illusion opposition is based on the difference between what certain characters in the novel think is happening, and what the narrative voice of the novel makes clear is actually happening in the narrative. The community/isolation opposition is based on the difference between connecting with others as opposed to being overly (in the novel’s terms) self-focused, and often calls upon a further opposition between connecting emotion and isolating emotion, such as trust versus fear. The personal choice/external control opposition is often based on agency: the extent to which a person can exercise choice about his or her actions, as opposed to being controlled by an external force. Sometimes that external force can invade a person’s mind, but it is still set up in opposition to who that person actually is.
The main narrative device in each book of the *Space Demons* trilogy is that a number of young people travel into a computer game where they learn more about how they should live in their normal world. In the first book, *Space Demons*, they learn to face fears within themselves, in the second book — *Skymaze* — they learn about the interconnectedness of all life and nature, and in the third book — *Shinkei* — they learn (amongst other things) that they must be careful in what they risk losing as they try to make their deepest desires come true.

The speech by which John Farrone sets the young people free in *Shinkei* demonstrates the values implicit in the *Space Demons* trilogy — hard work, the nuclear family, nature, a secure home, and the valuing of the ordinary:

“I guess we’re like most families. We fight sometimes, but we try to look out for each other. Our garden is nice. We grow lots of things. . . .”

. . .

He talked about the only thing he knew, about the real world. He talked about the taste of apricots, the purple-black colour of aubergines, . . . the chirp of a cricket and the pattern of the stars. He talked about the laugh lines at the corners of his mother’s eyes, and the way his father’s hair bristled at his throat, about the muscles in his brother’s arms, and the feel of chlorine in his eyes after swimming.

(Rubinstein 1996, p. 198)

Reality is constructed in terms of a kind of domesticised nature, in the context of a family that cares about its members even if they do have their disagreements. It is implied that this is a “real world” with which the reader will empathise, even if it is not that reader’s own experience.

This construction of suburban ordinary reality constructs starkly with the illusion of life which Professor Ito sees as the result of technology in the wrong hands:

“I could see how technology was altering the human race, giving extraordinary powers to a few while cutting them off from reality, and condemning the majority to a life on the fringes of society, kept quiet with the sops of technological circuses, ever more brilliant and ever more hollow.”

(Rubinstein 1996, p. 112)

Life for the masses in this scenario lacks connectedness to other people and to nature, which are fundamental to John’s speech above, and it also lacks any sense of agency. People are “condemn[ed]” and “kept quiet” as opposed to making the kind of active choices that the members of John’s family do when they, for example “try to look out for each other”.

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As this implies, in general Rubinstein’s trilogy draws a clear distinction between what is natural and what is created. It seems that *Space Demons* operates through some kind of bio-feedback (Rubinstein 1986, p. 40) and that it thrives on people’s hatred for each other (Rubinstein 1986, p. 85), but there is always a distinction between the human world and the virtual world of artificial creation. Although the Space Demons may stray into the children’s world of normality, for example, there is never the suggestion that this world of normality might itself be the construction of artificial intelligence. And although Professor Ito says in *Shinkei* “The program has changed in some way, using the players. Almost as if it’s become organic” (Rubinstein 1996, p. 48), there is still a clear distinction between what is happening in the computer game or as a result of having played the computer game, and the “real world” in the text.

Perhaps because of this, when the children travel into the computer games, they are there physically as well as experientially — they can’t, for example, be found by Andrew’s mother in the first novel when she comes looking for them in Andrew’s room. The secondary world of the computer games thus enables the children to be absent from their parents, and also gives the young people the opportunity to find their own direction away from — or even in spite of — their parents or caregivers (a typical demand of much fiction written for young adults). The technology allows the children to move away from being under the external control of their parents to a situation when they must exercise personal choice at a much deeper level than they currently do in their ordinary lives.

The reality/illusion opposition also works in relation to the contrast between adults and the young main characters, especially in *Space Demons*. The interaction between Andrew and the psychiatrist, Dr Freeman, is an example of how the games render even the well-meaning adults powerless — Dr Freeman, for example, impressively misses the point of what Andrew is going through:

> “Tell me what you’re feeling now, Andrew,” Dr Freeman said calmly.
> “Tell you what I’m feeling!” Andrew thought. “No way! . . .” Thoughts were rushing through his head with the speed of electronic impulses.
> 
> “The game’s not finished,” [Andrew] thought. “. . . I’ve got to get back into it one more time.”
> “Andrew,” the doctor said, quietly but insistently. “I’d like you to tell me what you’re feeling. Don’t be ashamed of anything, or think you have to hide anything. You can say whatever you like to me.”
> “I’d like to go now,” Andrew said, getting up abruptly. “I’ve just thought of something very important I’ve got to do. I’ve got to get home.”
> A look of frustration passed fleetingly across Dr Freeman’s face, but he hid it quickly under a professional smile. “Very well.” He stood up too.

1 How much choice they actually have in the first two games is debatable, however, and this issue will be discussed later in this paper.
added . . . , “just remember, we all have to face up to things we don’t like. We can’t run away from things for ever.”
“I know that!” Andrew thought with feeling. “But I don’t think you and I are talking about the same thing!”

(Rubinstein 1986, pp. 152–3)

The genuinely helpful adults in Space Demons are limited to small spheres of influence — the English teacher, Mr Russell, for example, only really affects the life of Elaine, whom he encourages in her gymnastics and for whom he finds a new foster home with the good-hearted Mrs Fields (Rubinstein 1986, pp. 131, 212).

One of the tasks of young adult protagonists in much young adult fiction is to find what reality is for them, and this can often mean learning to see beyond the illusions presented to them by adults, or giving up the illusions they had of the world when they were young children. The technology in Rubinstein’s trilogy enables the young people to see beyond the illusions in their “real” lives to the reality of what is happening underneath. Interestingly, in Rubinstein’s trilogy the contrast between the primary world of suburban life, and the secondary world of the computer games does not correspond to the reality/illusion opposition. In Space Demons, the real world is peppered with masks, such as Elaine’s refusal truly to face up to the pain of her mother’s leaving (Rubinstein, 1986, pp. 12), and Andrew’s unwillingness to face up to the disintegration of his parents’ marriage (Rubinstein, 1986, p. 114). Ironically, the constructedness of the computer games allows the truth of what is going on in the wider world to be revealed: Andrew gets Elaine to “shoot” him (and therefore send him into the computer game at a crucial moment) by goading her about her mother’s desertion, and her hatred later provokes her to tell Andrew what she knows about his parents’ separation, which will help them when they escape from the game. The game of Space Demons feeds on hate, and to defeat it the young players must cultivate compassion, understanding, and community. Andrew and Elaine face their fears together, (Rubinstein, 1986, pp. 184–193), and together they persuade Mario to give up the gun:

In front of them the words printed out rapidly and silently across the screen: TO TERMINATE GAME REPLACE GUN HERE: TO TERMINATE GAME REPLACE GUN HERE.
Mario said, “How do I know it’s for real?”
“You have to trust us,” Elaine said calmly. “We’re not lying to you. We like you. You should know that by now, we’ve told you enough times!”
“Yeah, and every time you told me, it hurt like hell!” Mario said. “It felt like someone was putting me back together with a welding tool!”
“I know that,” Andrew said. He was remembering how painful the refusal to hate had been.
“We went through it too. Not quite the same as you, but sort of. It kills, it really does. But it’s the only thing that works!"

... With a sudden movement Mario came to his decision. He thrust his hand forward, opened it, and let go of the gun. It merged into the blackness. Mario gave a howl of pain, as if he really was being sawn in two. Elaine grabbed him tightly, shivers running down her back, and Andrew clutched his arm from the other side.

(Rubinstein, 1986, pp. 203–204)

How honest that compassion, understanding and community actually are is open to question, however. Andrew claims that he “really meant the things [he] said to [Mario]. They wouldn’t have worked if [he] hadn’t” (Rubinstein, 1986, p. 202), but the statement that “[E]verybody likes [Mario]” (Rubinstein, 1986, p. 193) is clearly untrue in the novel’s own terms. Alice Mills suggests that the resolution to the game is based on a lie: she notes that Mario is “generally disliked [and] [t]he strategy devised by the children to win free from the computer program uses hypocrisy and lies and calls them truth” (Mills, 1991, p. 27). Even so, there is a sense that the deliberate act of saying positive things about Mario enables the young people to come to understandings that the text does support, such as Elaine’s realisation that negative self-perception can be crippling and yet difficult to change (Rubinstein, 1986, p. 204). The basic strategy of how the game is defeated may be flawed, but it does allow the novel’s overt values to be foregrounded.

In the scenes within the computer games themselves, there is also a sense that moral choices can be unproblematic — maybe an inevitable problem in texts using imagery calling upon the binary logic of early computer discourse. The choice of the gifts in Skymaze is an example of this: the young people must choose either the gift of flight or the weapon of force, unlimited time or the weapon of force, the elixir of healing or the weapon of force (Rubinstein 1989, pp. 31, 62, 149). And we know that the characters who have played Space Demons won’t choose the weapon of force because of what they have learned through that game — as Andrew himself points out (Rubinstein, 1989, p. 63).

The neat resolution of the games also implies that such easy choices regarding complex problems can be carried into the wider world, as the following passage from Skymaze suggests:

“I guess Darren’s not going to hassle Ben so much,” [Elaine] told herself... “and perhaps Ben’s going to stand up for himself a bit more. And Andrew and Paul will probably work things out.”

(Rubinstein, 1989, p. 190)

The actual practicalities of the children transferring what they have learned in the binary world of the computer game to the complexities of the world outside, however,
are not explored. Nonetheless, the use of the computer games as portals into a secondary world enables the question to be raised of whether the young people actually have any choice in their important decisions while in the games:

“It was programmed to work out how it did,” Andrew said nonchalantly. “There was never really any danger.”
“Idunno,” said Elaine. “We had to choose to do some pretty heavy things. . . .”
“You think you chose,” Mario said. “But what you chose was what was programmed.”
(Rubinstein, 1986, p. 206)

However, this issue of freewill is neatly sidestepped when Elaine — the focaliser at this stage — finds the idea that they were programmed to make the choices they did too difficult to believe and the whole experience too hard to put into words get their defences up again (Rubinstein, 1986, p. 206). Ostensibly, *Space Demons* has championed personal choice over external control, but there is a nagging question of whether that personal choice has been just an illusion and the whole situation has been controlled by the game.

Whether or not the choices made were genuine, *Space Demons* sets up a strong opposition between trust and hate, made obvious through the fact that the game of *Space Demons* is defeated by its players refusing to hate (Rubinstein, 1986, p. 157). This is given physical form by their willingness to give up the gun (Rubinstein, 1986, p. 191). The opposition between trust and hate operates within the community/isolation opposition, since *Space Demons* suggests that hate is an isolating emotion, which may give illusions of power but which is ultimately profoundly limiting. This is most clearly seen in Mario’s character — Mario is reluctant to give up the gun because it “makes [him] feel powerful” (Rubinstein, 1986, p. 201), but eventually he realises that he must trust Elaine and Andrew or be trapped inside the game forever. In trusting Elaine and Andrew, however, he not only escapes the game but learns to be better able to relate to others, a quality that develops in the second book in the series, *Skymaze*, in which Mario dies three times in the computer game through rescuing the others (in real life he goes into a coma after falling from a multi-storey car park). Mario recalls how powerful the gun in the Space Demons game made him feel (Rubinstein, 1989, p. 120) but after rescuing Andrew, Ben and Elaine, Mario feels a different and more positive sense of personal empowerment:

[I]nside he felt better than he could ever remember feeling in his life. These people were his friends! . . . They admired him. He no longer cared if they got to the end of the Skymaze or not! It seemed to him nothing could make him feel better than he did right now.
(Rubinstein, 1989, p. 124)

Needless to say, the novel privileges this genuine, altruistic empowerment over the solitary destructive power that the gun in *Space Demons* offers. The power that the gun gave was illusory, since it was based on the gun itself, whereas the
empowerment Mario feels now has come about because of who Mario is and what he has done.

Whereas *Space Demons* is based on the trust/hate opposition, however, *Skymaze* is based more on an opposition between fear and trust. Hate and fear are frequently related (what is feared is often hated), but whereas the high point of the Space Demons game is when Mario refuses to hate and is willing to replace the gun, the high point of the Skymaze game is when Elaine reaches the centre of the Skymaze and sees

> [T]he Earth, Gaia, the mother of them all, the mother who would never abandon any of her creatures. And [Elaine] knew also that they were all part of the Earth, no part more important than the others, and that their interdependence was the Earth’s life, their disunity its death.

(Rubinstein, 1989, p. 183)

Hate is what enables the players to get into the latter stages of the Space Demons game, but the game of Skymaze works slightly differently. Once it has been activated on the computer, the game of Skymaze can be accessed from the young people’s real world when they are nowhere near the computer, but only when they are in a state of great fear (Rubinstein, 1989, p. 89, for example).

Despite the power of the games, however, there is also the sense in the *Space Demons* trilogy that humanity is still largely in control of artificial intelligence, reflected in the debate in which Darren Challis takes part in *Space Demons*, which poses the question of whether artificial intelligence has the potential to become better than the human brain (Rubinstein, 1986, p. 136). Yet, as this paper has sought to demonstrate, the trilogy suggests technology can assist humans in becoming more human, according to a particular set of values. For Andrew, Elaine, Ben and Mario, their journeys into the computer games enable them to confront the darker side of their natures, to embrace their deepest fears and to survive the experience, and to develop (at least in some measure) personal skills that will help them in the wider world.

*Shinkei* constructs a slightly different relationship between humanity and technology than the earlier two books, perhaps because of being published some years later. *Shinkei* acknowledges that there are attractions in living psychologically in a virtual world. This is especially true for Mario. At the start of the novel

[Mario] wasn’t at all sure he understood the procedure for living in the twenty-first century, but he understood life on the Net. The rules there, if there were any, made sense and you had to discover them for yourself — and you had all the lives you wanted.

(Rubinstein 1996, p. 31)
The game of Shinkei is also able to infiltrate the minds of those who have played the previous two games, and has some kind of power to draw them together (Rubinstein, 1996, p. 148) even before they have played the game itself. The issue of personal choice versus external control is especially important in *Shinkei*, with the proponents of the dangerous sect ‘Pure Mind’ wanting to use the computer game to control the way people think (Rubinstein, 1996, p. 162), and the evil Leonard Miller wanting to have control of Shinkei in order to make huge amounts of money (Rubinstein, 1996, p. 185). Ultimately, solitary power leads to solitary isolation and despair, as Miller finds when he is trapped in Shinkei (Rubinstein, 1996, p. 212).

Issues of reality, relationships and choice are also raised in *The Mask of Caliban*, but through a very different scenario. Whereas in the *Space Demons* trilogy the worlds inside the computer games are clearly distinct from the real world, questions of what is real, what is constructed, and by whom it is constructed, weave in and out of *The Mask of Caliban* from the opening pages.

*The Mask of Caliban* is set in futuristic Australia. The powerful middle class throughout the world has handed the running of the world’s affairs over to artificial intelligences called Primes. The two most powerful Primes are the Speaker and the Witness. There is a power struggle between the two of them, and they agree to resolve this by taking part in a Game in which they pit their abilities to create virtual reality against each other. In order to do this, they need a human subject who will also contribute to the creation of the virtual reality. The human chosen is Caliban, a young man in his late teens.

Caliban does not really get any choice about whether he will participate in the Game: it is a case of “agree or die”. Part of his brain is wiped, which enables his participation in the Game. Caliban finds himself in derelict Melbourne, with his own heart removed and a prosthesis inserted in his chest, a black heart tattoo on his arm and a note saying “SEARCH IN THE HEART OF THE COUNTRY, THE COUNTRY OF THE HEART. BUT FIND US BEFORE YOUR BLACK HEART FADES” (Pryor, 1996, p. 54). The search involves a long and dangerous journey, but Caliban is aided in his quest by the feisty young woman, Corby, whom he eventually discovers is a program implanted in his brain.

It takes Caliban a while to realise what is happened to him and that what he is experiencing in the Game is virtual reality while his body is actually lying in a medical laboratory (Pryor, 1996, p. 125). Although there are memories in Caliban’s mind, he feels as though there is someone else within his mind trying to take him over. Eventually he realises that his body was bought some years back by Thomas Palmer, who created the Artificial Intelligences but who needed to disappear when he realised the Artificial Intelligences were turning on him. Palmer faked his own suicide by having his personality removed from his body and planted in Caliban, where it waited until it was safe to reappear.
When Palmer (from within Caliban’s body) threatens the Artificial Intelligences, they offer him the option of joining them and becoming immortal, but he refuses and points out that he has a Juggernog virus which could destroy the Primes themselves. Corby herself has been planted in Caliban’s brain by Palmer, but fights against her creator and is able to free herself and also help Caliban to resist being taken over. When the Speaker threatens Caliban, Caliban calls to the remnant of Palmer within himself and gets access to the virus. The Speaker offers Caliban the chance of immortality, but Caliban refuses, saying that the so-called Paradise created by the Primes is too costly for humanity. Caliban throws the virus at the Speaker, and leaves with Corby. The novel finishes with Corby and Caliban sitting on the beach, observing that “Home is where the heart is” (Pryor, 1996, p. 311).

Like Rubinstein’s trilogy, The Mask of Caliban also values a sense of home and belonging. The four texts also value tenacity, and implicitly challenge the illusion of gratification easily obtained: Elaine, for example, realises that part of the exhilaration of dancing in the real world comes from “the hard work, the effort within real time, that made the elation when it came all the more wonderful” (Rubinstein, 1996, p. 200). Caliban makes a similar discovery when he decides that he wants to “struggle at home” on the Earth he and many others have known rather than the accept the offer of a wonderful life in the so-called New Worlds (Pryor, 1996, p. 33). His decision pays off, since the New Worlds are actually an illusion, and people who have supposedly gone there have been killed by the authorities.

However, whereas in Rubinstein’s texts there is always the sense that at least something is “real”, in The Mask of Caliban the situation is more complex. When Caliban and Corby meet the eccentric King Phineas he asks them, “What if everything isn’t real? What difference does it make? You have to go on surviving anyway, don’t you?” (Pryor, 1996, p. 119). Reality in The Mask of Caliban is seen primarily in terms of emotion, which can be reached by relationships, by acknowledging the presence of feelings, and through various forms of art. The novel abounds in references to other texts, the most obvious being Shakespeare’s The Tempest, from which Caliban takes his name. And at one stage Corby asks, “All this poetry and stuff. It’s important to you, right?” To which Caliban replies, “Makes me think. Makes me feel. Makes me wonder about what it means to be human” (Pryor, 1996, p. 155).

As does Rubinstein’s trilogy, The Mask of Caliban stresses the importance of positive relationships. No matter what privileges isolated power may bring, friendship, love and connectedness are infinitely preferable. The Artificial Intelligences have a love-hate relationship with physical flesh and have also learned to have emotion (Pryor, 1996, pp. 242 and 217), but the AIs can only think of themselves. The Mask of Caliban suggests that three essential requirements of being genuinely human are to exercise free will, to take responsibility, and to be able to connect with other people.
To be real is to feel, *The Mask of Caliban* suggests, but to be human is to care for others and to make a conscious choice about doing so. This is most clearly demonstrated when the Speaker offers Caliban his heart back:

“Survival is important,” said the Speaker.
Caliban nodded slowly. . . . Survival is important. After dragging himself through the make-believe landscape, fighting off Palmer every step of the way, he felt he knew a thing or two about survival. But that was personal survival. What about survival of the race? Caliban could see the future. The future was the Game. . . . People as playthings. “Maybe,” he said slowly. “Survival. But not as pawns.”

(Pryor, 1996, p. 304)

No matter what apparent advantages control by an outside force may bring, it is never worth surrendering personal agency.

Ironically, it is Corby, the artificial program, who proves to be one of the most “human” characters in the novel’s terms and who helps Caliban to realise the importance of actively choosing to take responsibility, and of caring for others:

Corby stopped and glared at him. “It’s not their world. They may control it, but only through default. People just let things slide, taking the easy options, allowing the Primes to take charge of more and more!” She threw up her hands and started pacing back and forwards. “Stuff me, but they weren’t even ambitious! At first anyway. They were just willing, that’s all. And look what’s happened. Don’t abdicate your responsibilities!” She turned and gripped him by the shoulders, shaking him as if he were a doll. “Don’t abdicate your responsibilities!”

Caliban was astounded by her fierceness. Responsibilities? There were no responsibilities on the street. Looking after number one wasn’t a philosophy, it was a way of life.
But he couldn’t forget. The faces stayed with him — Laydown Sally and Spiroula, with her blind but knowing eyes.
Was he responsible for them?
And what about Corby? Cocky, enduring, belligerent Corby? He knew he never would’ve made it this far without her. . . .

. . .

He crawled up the slope. He knew that there was a reticence in him, a hesitation to form an attachment that he might later regret. It was the way he’d always lived, moving on whenever things began to tie him down. Things and people.
It was a void inside him, it always made him feel incomplete in some fundamental way.

(Pryor, 1996, pp. 255–257)

Although technology itself is not seen as bad, using it as an excuse for avoiding responsibility, is — for, as Caliban tells the Primes, “The day we put you in charge was the end of humanity” (Pryor, 1996, p. 303). Increased technology, then, is not the problem, but rather the dislike that the amorphous mass of humanity has for taking responsibility for itself. Apparent efficiency is not necessarily the best way to live, *The
*Mask of Caliban* suggests, especially if it comes at the cost of individual people refusing to see themselves as accountable for their own lives. As does the *Space Demons* trilogy, *The Mask of Caliban* privileges individual choice, agency and responsibility over control by an external force.

The technology of virtual reality in *The Mask of Caliban* also enables characters and settings to appear and disappear as required with no explanation, as they might in a dream. Phineas, for example, can simply disappear once he has made his point. This creates a surreal effect and blurs the distinction between reality and illusion, which is much of the point that the novel is making. One of the clearest differences between the way in which Pryor’s text and Rubinstein’s trilogy treat technology is that in *The Mask of Caliban* the reader is never sure what is reality and what is virtual, whereas in the *Space Demons* trilogy there is never any doubt about when the children are in the games.

Furthermore, technology in Rubinstein’s trilogy is never in danger of becoming confused with humanity. Technology might critique human tendencies, it might serve humanity, it might even try to take it over, but technology and humanity remain two essentially different entities. By contrast, *The Mask of Caliban* suggests that the real is not so easily discernible from the unreal, and that the line between humanity and artificial intelligence has the potential to be more blurred than we think. Perhaps this difference comes about in part because when the first of the *Space Demons* texts was published in 1986, virtual reality technology was in its relative infancy, and computers were by no means as accepted a part of everyday suburban life (in Australia at least) as they were by 1996. But even though Rubinstein’s *Shinkei* and Pryor’s *The Mask of Caliban* were both published in the same year, there is a sense that the purpose of the books is different. Like its two predecessors, *Shinkei* seeks to help its readers see how to live according to a particular liberal humanist set of values: home, community, care, valuing nature and so on. It uses technology as a tool to do this, but — apart from the comment by Professor Ito quoted earlier — does not critique either the technology itself or humanity’s relationship with it. Perhaps another reason for the differences between the texts is that Rubinstein’s novels seem aimed at a slightly younger audience, in which case it might be expected that issues may well be dealt with in a less complex manner.

*The Mask of Caliban*, on the other hand, asks the question of what it actually means to be human, and indeed what it means to be real. And whereas technology in the *Space Demons* trilogy is still largely under human control, and is used to put people into situations where they can learn more about how to live in the wider world, *The Mask of Caliban* uses technology to question the very nature of reality itself. Despite the differences between them however, Rubinstein’s *Space Demons* trilogy and Pryor’s *The Mask of Caliban* suggest that trusting, loving relationships, the willingness to be vulnerable, and the preparedness to persevere are essential values for an authentic and truly satisfying life.

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