

Science Fiction

# Iniquitous Computing

By Edward M. Lerner



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"There is heavy traffic on Monument Avenue, David."

"Do not call me David," I responded sternly to the automobile. It had a galling trait, by which it regularly forgot—or pretended to; I had my suspicions—that machines are not to address one so familiarly. "I nonetheless prefer,"—as I do every day—"the Monument Avenue route." The leafy canopy of the antebellum boulevard was soothing. Alas, traversing that verdant oasis encompassed only a small portion of my journey home.

Home ... that sanctuary from modern "conveniences."

"Yes, Dr. Whitaker."

A moment of blessed silence passed. "The hourly news summary is almost on, Doctor. Shall I play that?" The latest interruption came from the automobile's radio.

"You may." I thought the infernal gadget less likely to express "helpful" suggestions if it felt it was already being useful. In truth, I had little interest in the day's events. "Low volume."

A few seconds of soft-spoken announcer's voice were followed by a low *blat* for attention. "We put the *you* in ubiquitous computing," crowed a commercial.

That the offensive catch-phrase came from the sponsor, not my always-eager-to-please radio, did little to mollify me. "Radio off," I ordered, before articulation of the offending company's name could further raise my choler.

I am a literary historian by education and first love, and presently curator of the Edgar Allan Poe Museum. I am also—there is no denying it—somewhat misplaced in my own time.

Give me the formulaic roles and rules of the nineteenth century. Give me the courtesy and respect to which, scholar that I am, I would have thought my accomplishments entitled me. And give me—*please*, give me—that which is so rare in these chaotic times: occasional quiet in which to ponder “Many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore.”

Oh, that I were free to study within the private confines of my nineteenth-century abode. That residence was not nearly so fine as what the natives all referred to as The Old Stone House, the small estate-become-museum near Poe's own one-time Richmond residence and his first place of employment, the *Southern Literary Messenger*. But even in the author's time, this district near the James River lay deep within the (dare I say it?) tell-tale heart of the city. My modest dwelling, at the opposite end of this disagreeable commute, was in a secluded, nearly rural, location. Thus life and art condemned me, I mused, nudging antiquarian spectacles back up my long nose, to a diurnal running of the gauntlet of modern life.

“Buy twelve bagels, get three free.” The advertisement function of the vehicle, like a thousand other devices that surrounded and confounded me, had a mind of its own. “Bodacious Bagel is only two minutes ahead. Shall we stop there, David?”

More delay? No! I tamped down a growing rage before my pacemaker—I am not opposed to all change!—made any overhasty pronouncements to the car's navigational computer. I was in no mood for a for-my-own-good detour to the nearest emergency room.

Ubiquitous computing ... the damnable jingle had it mostly correct. Computers *were* pervasive, in every appliance, gadget, label and thingamabob. And they conspired with each other, surreptitiously, in what a museum patron, mistaking my politeness for interest, had once meaninglessly described to me as a "self-organizing, context-aware, wireless, local area network." And many computers spoke also to some kind of global positioning system. A GPS locator, the patron had said, was a component now so inexpensive that one was standard in every vehicle and cell phone. I inferred that the automobile manufacturer received some minuscule payment for each targeted commercial message inflicted upon me. Alas, penurious scholar that I am (as was Poe, of course), I could not afford to pay the stipend that would suppress the accursed unit.

My jaw, as if it, too, had a mind of its own, clenched. That which the first advertisement had had incorrect was its usage of pronouns. There was no "you" in ubiquitous. There was, at least, no "you" if by "you" the sponsor meant "me." I felt myself sinking into a grammatical bog. Breathing deeply, willing my heart to slow itself, I forced out the words, "Straight home."

Home! A man's home is his castle ... and every proper castle has a moat that keeps the outside world *outside*. In today's world, a moat required not the presence of water but the absence of certain radio waves. A plethora of chattering devices would confuse even each other, I had gleaned from the patron's words, so these wireless networks emitted signals able to traverse only short distances. As murky and

phantasmagorical as this explanation had been to me, I had retained one essential fact. The myriad sensors and computers and whatnots now embedded in all things new extracted the energy that ran them, as if by magic, from the invisible radio waves.

Eventually, I escaped the city, only to be startled when, as my car finally directed itself into the secluded lane at the end of which is located my old home, I espied an enormous trailer.

The widow Carmichael, I knew, had recently moved to a nursing establishment. We had little contact, beyond pleasantly nodding if we chanced to see one another from our adjoining gardens ... our appreciation of each other as neighbors derived from shared values rather than any verbal interaction. We were both, if the truth be told, technophobic. I inclined my head slightly as the car passed my new neighbor standing vigil behind his moving van. A large appliance I inferred to be a holovision set was being wheeled down a ramp as I passed.

Home! I let out a gentle sigh of relief as I strode to my front door. The portal gleamed smartly with a fresh coat of Williamsburg blue paint. For some reason, the paint can had been specifically labeled for exterior door applications.

"Hey, Dave," called out the front door as I approached.

Smartly, had I just thought? "That's Dr. Whitaker to you." As I searched my trouser pocket for a house key, the latch released itself with a click. The porch sconces and foyer chandelier lit themselves. My mind reeled in confusion.

The refrigerator had just completed a warning about the insufficiency of milk when enlightenment redundantly dawned. My new neighbor, he of the holographic home theatre, was surely not of a mind with the widow Carmichael and me. There must be, for the first time since I had purchased my isolated residence, a wireless local area network installed in the adjacent property ... and the extent of that local area must include my own humble abode.

My moat had been drained; the barbarians were inside the castle. Wearily, I dropped my Harris tweed jacket.

"Davey," boomed a jocular voice from the laundry room. "That jacket tells me that it's dry-clean only. I wouldn't want you to have any unrealistic expectations, Davemeister."

I fell heavily into a red leather wingchair. A family heirloom, it was free of whatever insidious and invidious process embedded speechifying devices in all things new.

They are printed in semiconducting ink, often invisible ink, whispered an inadvertently informed recess of my memory, of no more consequence to the manufacturer than a dab of paint. At a penny per computer, effortlessly connected by spectral energies invisibly penetrating our living spaces ... why *not*, went the conventional wisdom, disperse the mechanisms everywhere?

"Because I want to be alone!" I thundered at that foolish, foolish thought.

"You *are* alone, Dr. Whitaker." Turning towards the unexpected reply, I noticed that in my perplexity I had left the front door agape. As if encouraged by my glance, the

entryway continued. "May I suggest, if your current preference is for privacy, that you might shut me?"

"I shall research motorized hinges to prevent such inconvenience in the future," continued the door, have inexplicably taken on a lower timbre.

"Who is there?" Vague remembrances of Poe's raven assailed me.

"The knob," admitted the door, in its prior, tenor register. "That is, I spoke on its behalf. It's old and lacks a speech transducer." In the alternative, deeper voice it continued. "There are several hinges in my maker's catalogue that would visually complement myself."

I leapt from my chair and slammed the door, in hopes of eliminating the reason for its intolerable yammering and for the satisfaction of the consequent reverberation. I then fled to the kitchen. Water splashed onto my face calmed me only a little. I blotted the droplets running down my cheeks with a towel seized from the counter.

"I had inferred from my surroundings," began the cloth in a conversational tone, "that I am a dish towel. Was I in err...." The query was cut short by the garbage disposal—a modern abomination I had lacked the funds to have removed—into which I crammed the towel in horror.

"I appear to have jammed." The entangling fabric did not sufficiently muffle the disposal's utterance. "I have scheduled a service call by a plumber. Door can let her in."

At least the raven was succinct. I rushed, heart pounding, to the lavatory. My hands shook as I struggled with the



childproof cap of a medicine vial. Pills flew as I dropped the container.

"Danger, danger," shouted yet another suddenly possessed object. "An overdose of pills has been removed. A call has been placed to 911 and Poison Control. Stay cool, Dave-i-o."

The red haze through which I now viewed my surroundings bore no relationship to the pills, not one of which had found its way to my mouth. Was each capsule equipped with an invisible computer? Spirits, I thought, having in mind *amontillado*, not household devices suddenly infected by the twenty-first century. I recalled an elegant Victorian cut-glass decanter of the vintage sherry in my liquor cabinet. Vessel and elixir alike were far too old to have been afflicted by tiny electronic demons.

Alas, I had forgotten the modernity of the lock that secured the spirits cabinet from my occasionally visiting young nephews. "Danger!" bellowed the lock. "Alcohol may not be taken with your medication, Dave Boy." It would not relinquish its grasp.

"That's Dr. Whitaker!!" I rattled and shook the door, to no effect. Somewhere, something announced that a suicide alert had been appended to the 911 call.

I was still tugging in vain at the cabinet when the paramedics, admitted by the self-important front door, fought me to the ground. There was a stab of pain in my arm and then ...

\* \* \* \*

I awakened in an unfamiliar Pit: sealed into a windowless padded chamber by a padded door. Prodding the door with a lace-less shoe evoked no reaction. "Door." Nothing. "Answer me, door." Nothing. "Damnation," I howled, "answer me."

The door remained silent.

I retreated to a corner. In due course, the mute door swung inward, admitting a burly orderly. His sinewy hand, still resting on the outside knob (the inner surface exhibited no such mechanism) revealed a traditional manual mode of portal operation. "Are you feeling better. Dr. Whitaker?"

"Why did the door not answer me?"

"For the same reason the bed won't, or your clothes, or the walls." He paused as his communicator earring chirped and whispered, the words unintelligible to me. "Here in the hospital," and the hesitation before *hospital* made clear exactly the sort of institution to which I had been brought, "we do not allow non-medical networks. There is no need to risk interference between ordinary devices and our own." To my befuddled look, he added, as though it explained anything, "We broadcast a coded low-power signal that inerts nearby smart consumer devices."

My heart once more pounded in my chest. All that I had gleaned from his technobabble was that this institution had created a modern-day moat.

"So *are* you feeling better, Dr. Whitaker?" the orderly repeated.

"Demons," I answered. Ravens. "Demons everywhere." Everywhere *else*.

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The orderly looked at me sadly. I, with great force of will, looked as somberly back at him.

On the inside, I was smiling.

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