

different-tomorrows.com

Lupino had received no mail for three days. One day would not have been unusual. Twenty-four hours without contact from the network or beyond, the virtual community, was really nothing to worry about. Sometimes, not often, it happened.

48 hours was a different matter. 48 hours was unusual and concerning.

Lupino sent out a bulk mail about the launch of his new web site that was a week old. He wanted it returned. For the moment he didn't care about his reputation.

It was not returned.

On the evening of the third day, he turned off the filter so that something would get through. It was possible that the new upgrade was a bit too literal and needed some tweaking.

As he really didn't want a penis extension or something to make his girlfriend happy - doubtless a penis extension would have done that anyway - he would have to remove the spam manually, a very tedious process but one which he was willing to do, just to know that someone else thought he was alive.

At four a.m on the morning of the fourth day, Lupino checked his mail. There was just one message. He checked again. Just the one.

Maybe the down sizing rumour was true, but he was contracted for life, they couldn't do it.

Innumerable nanoseconds passed as he sat staring at the screen. It was a large enough e-mail but it wasn't from anyone he knew.

The from line read: enquiries@different_tomorrows.com and it was addressed to just him.

He pointed. The mail super-anticipated him and opened.

"Hi there," said a very friendly voice. "Are you tired of waking up each to the same thing? Are you dogged by past decisions that have made all your tomorrows the same, boring drudge?"

You CAN change this!

Different_Tomorrows.com is offering you a unique opportunity to change your present and future by changing your past.

With exclusive Dimension 9 technology you can travel back in time to do or undo all the things that have brought your humdrum existence to a grinding halt.

Use the link to visit Different_Tomorrows.com and change things. Now."

Another trench of nanoseconds fled to the past side of Lupino's time line before he pressed the link.

There was no sudden change in the screen.

From the right hand side a clear blue sky slowly spread across the screen, then there was a low humming sound and a cartoon biplane flown by a friendly looking chap in a leather flying helmet, floated across the screen, trailing a banner that read;

'Different_Tomorrows.com' 'Tomorrow belongs to you.'

Lupino sat back to see what other goodies the site had to offer.

The blue sky faded and was replaced seamlessly by a dark blue screen.

In a left sidebar was a navigation menu that contained the usual information.

Words floated into the centre.

Open an account.

Lupino hesitated. He didn't want to set up anything yet.

He tried the menu but nothing worked.

Open an account. No payment required.

Lupino clicked create account.

The form was more detailed than usual, asking for details of education, employment but it did say that the details would not be passed on and when that was stated, they had to mean it.

Lupino sent the form and a moment later he was back at the welcome screen and your account had been added to the menu.

He decided on About Us. Might as well see who these people were and how come they had to offer what they had to offer.

The whole idea intrigued him. He had never stretched his imagination to the possibility of time travel but he supposed that such a thing might be possible.

The page gave him every detail of the company's history from its humble beginnings in the obligatory back bedroom of some teenage geek to pictures of its brand new Head Quarters in a prestigious sector of Old Chicago.

It was certainly an impressive site and if you could believe even half what they said a more than impressive concept.

Lupino sat back in his chair. Just imagine being able to travel back into your own past, not just mentally. It was fantastic and yet somehow very believable. The technology was similar to linear transportation. You entered a chamber and instead of being transported to a different place, you went or your brain waves went, to another time. That was the Dimension 9. It was brilliant. He took the guided tour that showed him all the actual hardware. It looked like a shower cubical and that made him smile.

Then there was the offer of a simulation and Lupino had to do it. He had to see how it worked.

"Please select a year."

Lupino selected 2215, the year he dropped out of college. "Please select a month and a date."

06 14. Saturday the fourteenth of June, the day he had reached the decision that he was not going to go back..

The screen showed him, in his backyard, a very young man with long hair and a thin beard.

Lupino felt embarrassed. He'd been such a fashion slave, his appearance mattering much more than what was going on in his head.

The decisions were listed. He could go to Nevada, which he had, spend the evening in a local bar getting drunk or he could actually spend the evening studying.

He selected the third alternative and then selected the next week. College was high on his list of activities. It made him feel odd to see himself sitting there working away.

He fast forwarded weeks and months. The Christmas party where he met a lovely girl and they started dating and then there was his graduation, a beautiful day out in front of the college.

He saw a different young man, hair shorter, tidier, beard gone, a black gown covering his secondhand blue suit, and sitting there in the audience, his mom and dad, smiling happy and there was the girl smiling at him, looking proud of him.

Another fast forward; there he was with his nice apartment, his brilliant IT career, his beautiful wife and sweet kids, free transport, free vacations, all the things that Lupino, even at the age he dropped out of college would have wanted if he'd had the smallest ambition, the tiniest bit of self respect. All the things he could have had if he hadn't dropped out and gone to Nevada and a three year career as a bum.

These people said he could still have those things, that the man he was now could be sent back into the head of the man he was then and make him make different choices. Was it really possible?

He figured that the programme recognized inactivity, that was why it changed.

"You're wondering if it's all true, if it's possible. Our guarantee to you is that we will give you back the chances that you threw away or you won't pay us a cent."

Lupino looked up. "Nothing?" he said aloud.

"If you are in anyway disappointed with your experience, we will refund your deposit. More, your deposit will cover the setting up of any easy payment plan over your chosen time period."

Lupino eyed the screen with distrust. Whenever this kind of 'good deal' was on offer there always had to be a catch.

"The bottom line is the whole package, software and hardware plus shipping will cost you just \$2,550. Up front charge?

\$250. Not a penny more, not a penny less. Ten easy payments of \$230. There is no charge for credit. No hidden extras."

Lupino paused the programme. It was a lot of money but if it worked, if he really could go back and change things, the price became worth paying and if he really did get the better job the money wouldn't even bother him.

He rubbed his long fingers through his hair. Could it possibly be true? Could it really, really be done?

He leaned forward and continued the programme. The FAQs were helpful, mostly technical but they did harden the ideas in his head. If these people could do it, he wanted it. His life was nowhere and going down the tubes fast.

Of course he could study and get his qualifications but that would use up time and at thirty, time was something Lupino did not have.

He went back to the front page and clicked buy now.

Somewhere in the tangle of plastic files and cards his financial id card hid from the light. He rarely used it on line mostly just for checking his diminishing balance.

Again the order form was simple and filled in most of the information automatically from the stuff he'd given them when he'd created the account.

They promised twenty four hour delivery and Lupino thought they might mean it. Of course it could be like everything else in his life at the moment, just another let down but for the moment he could hope.

At exactly five the next morning, the package arrived. It was very small and quite heavy and Lupino thought that shipping alone would have taken up most of his \$250 deposit. He unpacked it like a kid with a birthday present. Shiny metal tubes that slotted together, sheets of hardened clear plasti-glass, two hexagonal pads, one of which, he presumed the top, had an octopus of coiled wires in the middle, there was one power lead and id cable to connect to the computer, an instruction manual, software and a pair of protective gloves.

The manual had a shiny cover with a picture of the company head quarters and the logo right across the centre so that it seemed to entwine itself through the trees.

A job here he wouldn't mind. This would be the kind of place he would like to work when he had his qualifications. He turned the first few pages that illustrated the assembly of the unit.

First things first. Lupino liked that approach. No filling your head with all the things that the thing was capable of before you had the chance to see if it actually worked.

Sticking closely to the instructions he assembled the unit right next to the computer. The connecting cables would have stretched two rooms but he wanted it close so that if something went wrong he could physically reach out and unplug.

Finally he connected the unit to the computer and power, installed the soft ware and sat back to look at his creation. It looked exactly as it did in the pictures, shiny, metal and clear plastic and glowing slightly top and bottom now that it was connected to the power.

He went to the computer and viewed the on screen welcome page.

The set up was exactly the same as it had been for the simulation.

He chose exactly the same information that he had with the simulation then stepped towards the machine. His heart was pounding as he slid open the door and mounted the base, positioned himself under the octopus of wires which automatically attached themselves to his head.

There was a tingling sensation all over his scalp which rapidly descended down is neck, into his shoulders and then through his entire body.

For a moment he could see the computer screen.

The little man in the flying machine was trailing another banner across the screen but Lupino couldn't read it and after a very short time, couldn't even see it and after a little bit longer, saw nothing at all.

The company had let the apartment immediately. Of course there had been essential tidying and removals but the new guy would be happy enough with what was there.

The one thing they had forgotten in their hurry to install their new, non job for life technician, was the computer.

He switched it on to log on to work and was amazed to see a cartoon slowly cross the screen. A little man flying a biplane that trailed a banner that read; So long sucker