

People's Worlds: Interactions with the Environment

Assignment Contents

- Extract from story 'LIFE-LIKE' exploring a possible future climate **(1185 words)**
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LIFE-LIKE (extract)

The Dark Ages were meant to be over. But whenever I looked around Unit 626, I was sure they were only just beginning. I'd been sent to flip the switch. The room was cool and dark, and the temporary air freshener had stopped, reviving the stench of stale.

At least it never smelled of death.

What had started as a luxury solution for the rich looked like a well-dressed catacomb. Beds lined the walls- but they never saw the same person twice. They saw multiple people a day. Originally, LIFE-LIKE had promised each paying individual a permanent spot so they could live their virtual lives in peace.

That promise was broken, but fortunately, the dead can't complain.

The streets outside were dense with dead bodies, and the air had slowly aged from a grey veil into a thick black smog. If you wanted to survive outdoors, you needed a high-quality oxygen mask, but the problem was oxygen was rare. Tree-breeders had started indoor tree farms, but the trees didn't take too kindly to them.

'Oi, boy! You turned them off yet?' Garrison's loud voice axed through my thoughts, forcing me back to the unit. Garrison was my manager.

'Just about to.' I replied quietly, my gloved hands reaching in the direction of the switch.

'Hey now. Remember they have it a damn sight easier than us. I call it a bloody lucky escape.' He said, eyes scanning the rows of still bodies, eyes masked with headsets, only their chests rising slowly. For now. That was only because of the tubes snaking from bedside units and into the masks covering their mouths.

I sighed. There was nothing to say. I flipped the switch, and like an ocean wave, the bodies raised before collapsing one by one until the room was still, apart from the flickering light of the overhead monitor.

‘Call up clearance, will you? There’s a fresh lot waiting downstairs to be plugged in.’

I nodded, heading to the in-room pager. Garrison charged off to meet the ‘fresh lot’.

Clearance was on their way. We couldn’t burn the freshly cut-off: pollution had been heading for the crimson level for years now. Instead, they went into vaults, layered on top of each other, unaware they had been blissfully cut off from the life they’d paid for. It wasn’t like they could complain. The afterlife must be better than here, and yet I was sure even Heaven was filled with smog now: angels’ wings weighed down with weighty smog, masks covering their immortal faces.

Clearance burst in, adorned in oxygen masks, ready for the smog-suffocating air which rose from where the dead were kept. They ripped off their oxygen masks and headsets before hoisting them onto a cage-cart, one body on top of the next, before closing the cage-cart door and wheeling them away. The cart used to belong to a *Tesco*, or a *Home Bargains*, or something like that- back in the good days; the “unaware” phase of the Anthropocene era. Apparently, they carried all sorts: seasonal throws, personal slicers for each fruit variety- or ‘plastic crap’ as Garrison called it. That was before a desperate turn to wooden items to promote sustainability. But then it was too late. The trees suffered, and so did our oxygen. So, the cages that once carried consumerism and commercialism now carried the consumerist and commercialist’s grandchildren and great-grandchildren. What a sacrifice they made. The sound of the wheels silenced as a different team gave the place a quick wipe down.

Not a minute later, the ‘fresh lot’ arrived, led in by Garrison. It consisted of four people, probably in their thirties, or forties- it was hard to tell with their dull skin and empty eyes. A family came in too, consisting of one weepy mother, an otherwise-engaged father, and two young children. They all had their own oxygen masks on already.

The mother clung to her children. The part of her face I could see was red and glistening with tears.

‘Get off, mum, I’m fine. I’ll see you soon.’

‘Yeah, mum, we’re just going to live in a cool game.’ The younger one pushed her off.

‘And we’re coming out when the world is good again anyway!’ said the older one.

The mother shot a glance at me with these words. I gave her an understanding look.

‘Of course, my love,’ she lied bravely. ‘We will see each other then.’

When LIFE-LIKE was first established, buyers were promised they could leave their custom-built simulated lives and come back to the real world when pollution had cleared. Ah, what a thought.

‘You ready, folks?’ Garrison clapped his hands together.

They nodded.

The father took him aside.

‘How do I know you won’t unplug us all?’ He said through gritted teeth.

‘Sir, with the world like it is, if I were to unplug you, I’d be doing you a grave favour. You really think you’re going to wake up and the streets won’t be storey-high with crap, and the air will be clean?’ He laughed. ‘This isn’t a luxury escape, pal, it’s the only one.’

The man looked from me to my manager.

‘Crooks.’ He spat.

‘I can refund you and let you back on the streets.’ Garrison offered.

‘And die with the poor? You must be joking. Hook me up. Hurry.’

He didn’t say goodbye to his wife, who had heard the entire conversation. Their children already had headsets on, and their chests rose and fell with every passing moment.

Five minutes later, the switch had been flipped twice. Clearance had returned. The father was thrown on the streets, but the children and mother went down the shoots and into the underground vault with the others.

Garrison whistled, preparing to greet the next ‘fresh lot’ as he liked to call them. But something stuck in my head: that man had been right, we *were* crooks.

LIFE-LIKE had been years in development, backed by AI. At first, people laughed and called it ridiculous. But as the air worsened, more people started signing up. The problem was it was expensive. Originally, we had good intentions: buyers were meant to stay hooked up; they were meant to live out their perfect dream lives and see their families again. But... demand was high. Resources were low. We ran out of room. And we ran out of oxygen.

My manager was right- these *were* the lucky ones. The ones who had died in disasters were luckier again. They didn’t have to see what we had become; what our planet had become. Buildings collapsed all over the world, and the weather was vicious. Livestock was a myth now- it was hard to believe anyone ever ate fresh meat.

My heart burned in fury. Why didn’t they stop this? Why didn’t they act when they had the chance? I had read texts that said a lot of them didn’t believe global warming was real. ‘*It’s pretty damn real now.*’ I wanted to scream at them. How could they not have

seen that they were ruining everything- that they were paving the way for this undeserved death?

Pitch/Essay Segment

‘LIFE-LIKE’ transports readers to a dark and dramatised but eerily possible future which could be ours if the relationship between humanity and our ecological habitat remains unchanged. This short extract of a longer climate-fiction story sees humanity perish due to depleting oxygen levels and increasing pollution. The narrator reflects on humans, their priorities, and the consuming nature of capitalism. Meanwhile, the reader explores the devastating result of the ongoing overwhelming impact of the Anthropocene era. Contextual elements of the climate crisis, such as urbanisation and consumerism, are addressed, and the reader can ponder global warming as a product of economic growth aspirations.

Climate-fiction allows readers to contemplate the centuries-long “resource-focused, profit-seeking behaviours” of humans.¹ ‘LIFE-LIKE’ demonstrates the impact of these behaviours, portraying their contribution to the dire story setting while showing persisting efforts to profit from dying people. As journalist Anna Walker says, “Novels allow us to imagine possible futures from the comfort of the present.”² Importantly, in the present, we can change our future circumstances with the security of knowing we have time. Thus, this story inspires readers to act, as well as process the posed threats of climate change to our future families and successors.

Researching the anti-deforestation movement, *Chipko*, during the *People and the Environment* module clarified the diminutive value that capitalist society has for trees and our ecology. Discovering that despite only three trillion trees remaining on our planet- a number subject to human activity and natural disaster- we persist in cutting 15 billion annually.³ This treatment of trees as indispensable produce for economic gain demonstrates the concerning incomprehension that growth-concerned capitalist countries have for biodiversity, forests, and our reliance on them to live. ‘LIFE-LIKE’ allows the reader to engage with the troubling outcome that this current ecological relationship could have. Therefore, the story explores an ecology devoid of trees and the consequential carbon increase. The reader observes humanity fighting to breathe in

¹Adeline Johns-Putra, *The Conversation* (2019) < <https://theconversation.com/climate-change-novels-allow-us-to-imagine-possible-futures-read-these-crucial-seven-124216> > [accessed 6 May 2025].

² Johns-Putra, 2019.

³ Rachel Nuwer, *BBC* (2019) < <https://www.bbc.co.uk/future/article/20190911-what-would-happen-if-all-the-worlds-trees-disappeared> > [accessed 5 May 2025].

heavily polluted, asphyxiating air in a rapidly heating city. Urbanisation has only worsened the suffocating heat, and there are frequent disasters and minimal resources including the essential water, air and food.⁴ ⁵ ‘LIFE-LIKE’ exposes this fight for life at the hands of capitalism as the narrator observes the respiratory issues resulting from increased urban pollution.⁶ They wonder whether it was worth it, urging readers to consider the same.

There is a stark contrast between the indigenous view of trees as valuable, vital resources, compared with the capitalist view as indispensable. In the story’s progression, the narrator finds informational resources from the year 2025 which inform that 6.2% are responsible for 80% of the planet’s biodiversity.⁷ This segment will show the reader how adopting the practices of non-capitalist traditional and indigenous societies could successfully achieve a sustainable balance between human demand and our ecology. Thus, amidst its dystopian despair, ‘LIFE-LIKE’ offers a salvageable solution presently available to us. In adopting and learning the sustainable practices of indigenous communities, we can safeguard biodiversity by unlearning the pollutive, wasteful, and emission-driven ways of excessive capitalist production.⁸

Although this fiction hypothesises a society valuing lifestyle over life, it represents a dark truth: society’s ecological appreciation has been smothered in the smog-like cloud of capitalist values. Our basic needs have been replaced with an urge to consume at the expense of planetary resources. In 2016, the *BBC* cited that over 5.5 million people were dying prematurely on an annual basis due to pollution.⁹ Most of these fatalities occurred in the developing economies of China and India, demonstrating the damage caused by a drive for economic growth. ‘LIFE-LIKE’ portrays this destructive and fatal obsession using the example of retail cages with dead bodies replacing the unnecessary capitalist goods once carted on them.

The purpose of this climate-fiction literature is to engage the reader with the relationship between economic growth and our ecology. A country’s growth and GDP (gross domestic product) are inherently connected to increasing emissions.¹⁰

⁴ Peekaboo Kidz, *What If All Trees Were Cut Down?* [video]. 2023

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6x8luJlcXTk>> [accessed 5 May 2025].

⁵ Knowledge Factory, *What Would Happen If Forests Disappear From The Earth?* [video]. 2023

<<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=gq5qhHZ9Hks&pp=ygUod2hhdCB3b3VsZCB0eXBwZW4gaWYgdGhlc mUgd2VyZS-BubyB0cmVlcw%3D%3D>> [accessed 5 May 2025].

⁶ Knowledge Factory, 2023.

⁷ World Bank Group, *Indigenous Peoples* (updated 2025)

<<https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/indigenouspeoples>> [accessed 5 May 2025].

⁸ Our Changing Climate, *How We End Consumerism* [video]. 2021 <

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=omcUaD8pxaY>> [accessed 5 May 2025].

⁹ Johnathan Amos, *BBC* (2016) < <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-35568249>> [accessed 5 May 2025].

¹⁰ Our Changing Climate, 2021.

Ultimately, ‘the capitalist growth model is incompatible with a zero-carbon world’.¹¹ Stories of possible eventualities can effectively convey the need to reduce emissions to remain below 1.5 degrees Celsius. *Our Changing Climate* insists that “relentless overconsumption is a symptom of capitalism” and not an “inherently biological trait”.¹² Capitalism’s production of an endless conveyor-belt of items is self-interested, sustaining itself and harvesting economic growth.¹³ It makes unnecessary items like “seasonal throws, personal slicers for each fruit variety” seem exciting. Climate-fiction aims to remind readers that these “life-changing” items do not change our material circumstances, status, or well-being. However, they alter planetary circumstances and affect future generations.

Overall, this story portrays the premeditated population growth and urbanisation- a migration which, coupled with economic growth ambitions, results in excessive carbon emissions, increased polluting activity, and respiratory issues before all else. With pollution-related deaths already reported, and a confirmed migration to urbanisation, this story creates a realistic dystopia which acts to emphasise the all-engulfing nature of capitalism. Capitalism, advocating the importance of monetisation over sustenance, continues to reap money and hold its values in a dying society of its making. Reading of such horrors as the one projected in ‘LIFE-LIKE’ allows readers to process and consider “avenues to end consumerism and craft an ethical way of living well”.¹⁴ Climate-fiction’s ability to help us mentally process climate change and its prospects, means we can process solutions.¹⁵ These dystopian tales serve as reminders of our responsibility to others on the planet and the future.¹⁶

¹¹ Our Changing Climate, 2021.

¹² Our Changing Climate, 2021.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Johns-Putra, 2019.

¹⁶ Johns-Putra, 2019.

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