Fashion

How to look good on a budget.

Jenny and Claire dashed across the school perimeter line together. The hated school uniforms blinked out and proper clothes took their place. Jenny was wearing a layered ensemble with a sheer top over a multicoloured blouse and an A-line skirt over light flowing trousers, a nice outfit for the real world outside school. But it was three days old. Claire's was four days old. Jenny let her eyes slide over it without looking closely.

"We have to do better than this," said Claire.

"And look at our nails."

"Let's not."

Neither could afford high-resolution nails: they were stuck with a limited range of solid colours. And smart hair extensions were just a daydream. Other girls in their class had a new dress every day. Any adult woman with even a hint of style wore at least two different outfits a day. E-fashion changed as fast as the news and old e-fashion was as interesting as old news.

"This might as well be five days old," said Claire. "The previews for tomorrow are up already and the whole look is changing. We are so-o-o last week."

"And we are so-o-o broke."

They headed towards Virtual Paradise for a couple of hours of role-playing games. It was popular with their class, cheap, and the game costumes would cover their out-of-date clothes.

"My allowance is maxed out," said Claire.

"I know. Mine too."

They walked and talked. Any more spent on clothes meant they couldn't afford games, swimming, parties or even mall-hopping. No point in surfing the fashion wave if no one saw you. The closest they could come to a high-fashion life was to look good for one day a week and spend the rest of their time in hiding. There were no other options. Jobs were hard to get when you were 15 and, anyway, working would cut into their limited social time.

"Let's go swimming tomorrow," said Jenny.

Swimming was good. E-fashion didn't work well under water so it didn't extend to swimware. The trick was to get out of your street clothes quickly and stay in your swimsuit until the last moment.

"Hey," said Claire. "Why don't you ask your brother for help?"

"James? The ultimate cheapskate. Wouldn't lend me a dime."

"James the computer whiz. These outfits are just zeros and ones from a computer. James is very good at getting zeros and ones out of computers."

James's room was even weirder than when Jenny last visited. There were more computers, many of them torn open. There was a crate on the floor swarming with tiny machines, trying to escape. But James was more helpful than she had expected.
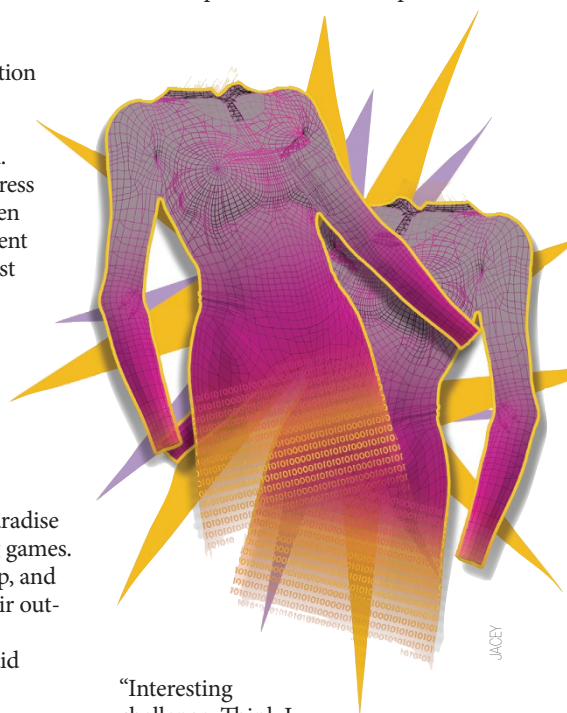
"Interesting challenge. Think I can do it."

"You aren't going to pirate low-resolution previews and fill them in with some program are you?" Jenny could not believe people actually wore those. What you got was a phoney-looking parody of the real thing, which advertised that not only was the wearer a dishonest cheapskate, but that she had no sense of style.

"I said a challenge, not a cut-and-paste job. Give me your allowance for the next month and a new dress a day is yours." One of the machines was climbing the side of the crate. James hit a key on his computer and it fell back down. "To make this work I need to bulk-buy fashion credit — gives me direct access to the batch root-code string and the defining parameters."

Jenny let her lack of understanding show.

"You and Claire will each get a new dress every day for the month. The two of you go everywhere together — she can pay for you. If I don't deliver, you get all your money back." Jenny smiled agreement. James was a boy of his word.

Jenny's phone had displayed the 'new clothing' icon just after lunch. She zapped it into her e-frock in a break. When school ended she ran to the perimeter, stopped, then stepped across slowly, with dignity, as if she were a model on a catwalk. The school uniform blinked out and her new outfit took its place. She gave a little whoop of delight. It was a ra-ra skirt with matching top. She had seen it previewed last night — very modern post-retro, very today. The resolution was so sharp she could see threads in the weave. She twirled and a ruffle seemed to sway in the breeze. The illusion was perfect.

"Dressed for success," she told herself. She inspected it with a critical eye. The hemline was a bit short. She wanted to look enticing, not available. She used the phone to zap it down a couple of inches so the projection didn't show so much leg. She adjusted the settings on her necklace to compliment the new outfit.

"I've got a new dress," yelled Claire, waving her phone as she ran towards the perimeter. She jumped across the unseen line and fiddled with her phone. Her e-frock went Basic Black for a moment, the default setting you would only wear to visit an elderly relative, then it burst into colour. She spun in surprise. A ruffle seemed to sway in the breeze.

"James!" screamed Jenny.

"Dialling," said Jenny's phone.

"Hi Jen," said James.

"We've got the same outfit."

"Of course," said James. "That's how I did it. I broke the unique ID code by truncating the access string then…"

"James! Can you fix it so we have different dresses?"

"Of course not. It would take a week with the schools' computer to break that algorithm. The trap door function…"

"James! We can't go anywhere wearing the same dress."

"Why not? I thought you'd like it."

John Frizell

John Frizell was trained in biochemistry and works on ocean conservation for Greenpeace. In his spare time he walks, builds robots and writes short stories.