

INTRODUCTION

The early twentieth century was an exciting time for technological development, as companies looked to a future enhanced by science and robotics. This idealized future was on display in the 1939 World's Fair held in New York, which promised visitors a glimpse into "the world of tomorrow." With exhibits that attracted forty million people, the World's Fair showed what life could be like through the expanded use of electricity, and it included early glimpses into the technology of television, as well as an idealized model city dubbed "Futurama" that boasted complex highway systems. Five months after the fair opened, however, Germany invaded Poland and initiated World War II in Europe, forcing the fair to close the following year. The war did not halt scientific or technological advances, but it instead led to new breakthroughs in response to wartime needs. With these developments, the possibilities of life in a postwar "world of tomorrow" seemed far greater than ever imagined. Glimpsed in the 1964 World's Fair, its first return to New York since World War II, an updated "Futurama" exhibit revealed the extensive ways life with technology had changed. In this lesson, students will analyze differing visions of life with technology before and after World War II through a comparative study of the 1939 World's Fair and the revised portrayals of the future at the 1964 World's Fair. Through this exercise, student will see how the war affected the use of technology in daily life, as well as hopes for the future in the postwar world.

MATERIALS

- + Images from the 1939 and 1964 World's Fair also available at ww2classroom.org
- + Excerpts from *The New York Times* articles on the 1939 and 1964 World's Fair
- + Copies of the **overview essay "The Scientific and Technological Legacies of World War II"**

OBJECTIVES

By comparing visions of the future from before and after World War II, students should be able to assess in specific ways how the war affected life with new technology. Through the analysis of primary and secondary material, students should develop arguments on the ways political developments came to influence technological advancements. Through this approach, students will see how much of the "world of tomorrow" came to be, what did not, and what developments came into existence during World War II that changed life in ways never anticipated in 1939.

COMMON CORE STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.7

Integrate visual information (e.g., in charts, graphs, photographs, videos, or maps) with other information in print and digital texts.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.6

Compare the point of view of two or more authors for how they treat the same or similar topics, including which details they include and emphasize in their respective accounts.

ONLINE RESOURCES

For additional multimedia resources, visit ww2classroom.org.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.7

Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.9

Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR HISTORY

HISTORICAL THINKING STANDARD 3

The student engages in historical analysis and interpretation, therefore, the student is able to demonstrate the following:

- Consider multiple perspectives of various peoples in the past by demonstrating their differing motives, beliefs, interests, hopes, and fears.
- Draw comparisons across eras and regions in order to define enduring issues as well as large-scale or long-term developments that transcend regional and temporal boundaries.
- Challenge arguments of historical inevitability by formulating examples of historical contingency, of how different choices could have led to different consequences.
- Hypothesize the influence of the past, including both the limitations and opportunities made possible by past decisions.

HISTORICAL CONTENT ERA 8, STANDARD 1B

The student understands how American life changed during the 1930s.

HISTORICAL CONTENT ERA 8, STANDARD 3C

The student understands the effects of World War II at home.

HISTORICAL CONTENT ERA 9, STANDARD 1B

The student understands how the social changes of the postwar period affected various Americans.

HISTORICAL CONTENT ERA 9, STANDARD 1C

The student understands how postwar science augmented the nation's economic strength, transformed daily life, and influenced the world economy.

PROCEDURES

1. Open the lesson with a full-class discussion by asking students how they use technology each day. What is the importance of technology to their daily lives? Could they imagine a day without it? Discussion can focus on smart phones, computers, electricity, etc.
2. Shift the discussion to focus on technology before World War II. What kind of technology do they believe people used or valued the most? Remind students of the historical context of the 1939 World's Fair, particularly that the United States continued to feel the lingering effects of the Great Depression.
3. Have students analyze images from the 1939-1940 World's Fair, reading the captions from *Magic Motorways*. What kind of technology did the Fair emphasize to make "the world of tomorrow"? How did people before World War II see technology as a way to improve life?

4. Have students read the excerpts from *The New York Times* article “A Walk among World’s Fair Ghosts.” How does the author describe the 1939 World’s Fair and the General Motors “Futurama” exhibit? Ask the students to consider the author’s statement, “the fair came to be outdated within its own lifetime.” Why does the author make this claim?
5. Bringing information from the **overview essay “The Scientific Legacies of World War II,”** have the class consider either in a full-class or small group discussion how science and technology advanced during World War II, as well as how the war changed the way people lived with technology after 1945.
6. Compare the visions of “the world of tomorrow” in 1939 with the presentation of “Futurama” in the included article, “G.M. Offers Trip into the Future.” What did the 1964 exhibit emphasize? Ask the students to discuss the connections between this postwar vision of the future and the scientific and technological advancements made during World War II.
7. Conclude the discussion by asking the class how the war changed the way people lived with technology or dreamed about the future. In what ways did “the world of tomorrow” become a reality? How much of that was possible through the advancements achieved during the war?

ASSESSMENT

Through reading and discussing both primary and secondary sources, students should show the ability to analyze the way World War II affected the development and use of technology in daily life. Through critical evaluation of visual and text-based sources, combined with comparisons of the presentation of technology in both the 1939 and 1964 World’s Fair, students should be able to speak to specific ways the war altered the nature of scientific advances, affecting, in turn, the way people used and lived with technology after the war.

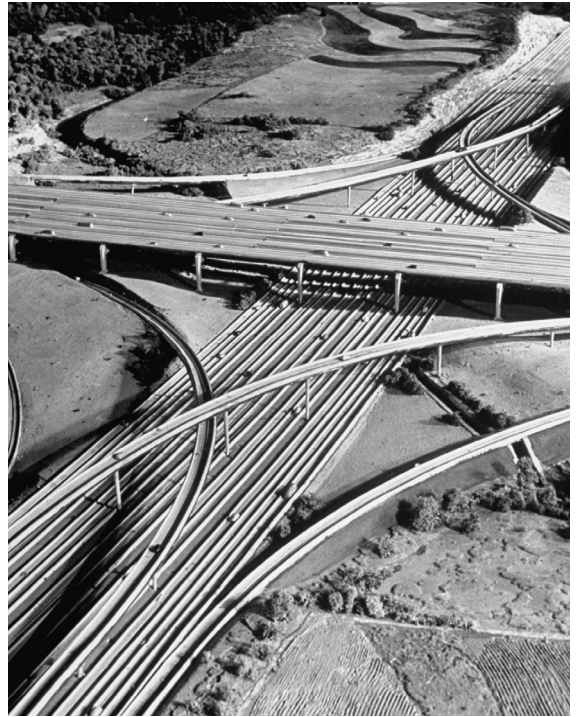
EXTENSION/ENRICHMENT

1. In both the 1939 and 1964 World’s Fair, exhibits predicted what life would be like for Americans 20 years into the future through depictions that indicated a growing reliance on science and technology. In both cases, the predictions responded to notable issues of the time (rising use of automobiles in the 1930s, the space race in the 1960s, etc.). In this extension exercise, ask the students what they consider to be notable issues of today. Then ask them to construct their own “Futurama,” showcasing how technology could address the issue they select. Depending on the time allowed, this presentation could take a variety of formats—visual, written, or model construction.
2. Americans in the 1930s and 1960s saw technology as a way to address issues of daily life, but they often did not consider the potential consequences such a reliance on technology might cause. Looking at the “Futurama” exhibits presented at both the 1939 and 1964 World’s Fair, ask the students to analyze in a written response the possible problems the technology featured in the exhibits might lead to. Have them conclude their assessment by looking at the benefits and issues of popular technology today.

CONTEXT ON GM'S FUTURAMA

"Five million people saw the Futurama of the General Motors Highways and Horizons Exhibit at the New York World's Fair during the summer of 1939. In long queues that often stretched more than a mile, from 5,000 to 15,000 men, women and children at a time, stood, all day long every day, under the hot sun and in the rain, waiting more than an hour for their turn to get a sixteen-minute glimpse at the motorways of the world of tomorrow. There have been hit shows and sporting events in the past which had waiting lines for a few days, but never before had there been a line as long as this, renewing itself continuously, month after month, as there was every day at the Fair."

– Norman Bel Geddes, *Magic Motorways*.



(Image: Getty, 72434330.)

"Much of the initial appeal of the Futurama was due to its imaginative quality. But the reason that its popularity never diminished was that its boldness was based on soundness. The plan it presented appealed to the practical engineer as much as to the idle day-dreamer. The motorways which is featured were not only desirable, but practical."

– Norman Bel Geddes, *Magic Motorways*.



(Image: Getty, 640505923.)



World's Fair at Night
(Image: AP, 3907070241.)



(Image: AP, 80814035566.)

CONTEXT ON GM'S FUTURAMA



(Image: AP, 48262904043.)



(Image: AP, 80814035707.)

EXCERPTS: WILLIAM K. ZINSSER, "A WALK AMONG WORLD'S FAIR GHOSTS"

The New York Times, January 17, 1960.

Chalco is projecting a net loss might not very

"One of New York City's loneliest spots, on a January morning in 1960, is Flushing Meadow Park. The vast plain is, as theatrical folk say, 'between jobs.' Twenty years ago it bustled with the biggest of all world's fairs—one that cost \$155,00,000, covered 1,216 acres, had 300 buildings of bright color and futuristic design, and contained enough exhibits to satisfy every mind and every weary foot. Four years from now an even bigger fair (for all fairs must be the biggest ever) will rise on the same site. But the other day in the park's interior not a creature was in sight except a solitary golfer and a flight of ducks.

[...]

"[The 1930 World's Fair] theme was 'The World of Tomorrow,' and its imagination kept pace with the theme, or tried to. The buildings had novelty because they were in novel shapes, their broad curves and eccentric angles heralding the new geometry of architecture. The exhibits were tantalizing glimpses of luxuries to come...

"One of the miracle [visitors] say was the R.C.A.'s 'Living Room of Tomorrow,' where people sat watching pictures on the screen of a little electronic box. Nobody really believed that he would ever own such an amazing machine—such gadgets were the province of crackpot inventors...

"What man straying into the Carrier Corporation's giant igloo... could swallow the idea that tomorrow's homes and offices would all be air-conditioned? Who could foresee much use for those strange substances called plastics in the 'Hall of Industrial Science'? To ponder such mysteries a visitor needed time, and he could always be sure of finding it while waiting to see the General Motors 'Futurama.'

"Only on very rainy days was the queue a short one, but few tourists begrudged the hour they spent waiting. For once inside the Futurama they were transported—literally on a moving belt figuratively into an American landscape that looked too fabulous ever to come true, with its interlaced turnpikes and swift traffic.

[...]

"When the fair reopened on May 11, 1940, Nazi troops had just broken the French defenses, and by the following month France had fallen... A statue of Mussolini swaggered over the Italian empire exhibit, George Washington and the Four Freedoms stood resolute on Constitution Mall, and all was serene at the Japanese pavilion...

"So the fair came to be outdated within its own lifetime. The war quickly produced feats of technology that were not even imagined at the various science exhibits, or that were remote fantasies at best. 'Court of Peace' and 'Democracy' took on an edge of irony; the fireworks detonating over the 'Lagoon of Nations' every night ceased to seem mere entertainment; and as the bleak summer of 1940 dragged on, and millions of visitors flocked to the fair to see its bold vision of the future, 'The World of Tomorrow' became 'The World of Yesterday' before their eyes."

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**JOSEPH C. INGRAHAM, "G.M. OFFERS TRIP INTO THE FUTURE:
PAVILION FEATURES WONDERS OF GLOBE AND THE MOON,"**

The New York Times, April 9, 1964.

"The distant future, the near tomorrow and a touch of hard sell were unveiled yesterday by the General Motors Corporation at a preview of its Futurama pavilion at the World's Fair.

"As befitting the world's largest manufacturer, General Motors has the most expensive display—\$50 million—and the largest plot—8 1/2 acres. . . The visitor begins his tour of Futurama—the same name that General Motors used at the 1939 fair when it stole the show with its practical vision of the highway future—with a roller coaster ride. However the similarity ends there—25 years ago the theme was national in scope, now it is global.

"FUTURE CITY SHOWN"

"The ride into tomorrow will take visitors to the moon, the polar regions, the ocean depths, the jungle and the desert. At the end of the 15-minute, 1,500-foot tour is the metropolis of the future, complete with electronic highways. Speakers mounted in the headrest of the chairs, which are three abreast, supply a travelogue against a background of original music.

"The theme is the progress of man and his dreams for the future told in terms of people, products and new ideas that, according to General Motors, could be a part of everyday life by 1984.

"To dramatize the 'hope and inspiration implicit within mankind's possibilities for progress,' General Motors has a variety of settings. Strange vehicles move across the face of the moon in animated display. The polar regions come alive in a laboratory scene. Geologists probe the ocean floor for new minerals while families are pictured relaxing in undersea resort hotels. The desert—irrigated with desalinized water—blossoms with fruits and flowers.

"The final 300 feet of the ride bring the traveler on the conveyor belt to the city of the future, where computers control traffic and all the things that planners hold are inevitable come to life in miniature.

"After the tour through the world of tomorrow, which 70,000 persons are expected to take daily, there is a change of pace. Static exhibits portray General Motor's role in pure and applied research. Then comes the product plaza where the corporation has gathered its current automotive and appliance models and where the company expects to line up prospective buyers."