Speak a command or touch a button, and your wish for food, drink or machinery is instantly realized. Science fiction gives us the equivalent of the magic genie -- not in a lamp but through technology.

Wonderful stuff, but we are not quite there yet.

In the meantime, the techno-wizardry trickle-down from our aerospace industry has yielded an amazing machine that has some features of our wished-for replicator. What if you could reincarnate 3-D exact duplicates of precious artifacts, mementos, hobby items and sculptures? Or create models, or prototypes of parts and components? Or even put together whole machines, working demos of your imagination's designs, inventions and ideas -- speedily and at very affordable costs?

You can. It's even possible with the addition of some sophisticated laser measures and imaging equipment to reverse-engineer items rendered in 3-D from drawings, photos and parts.

Entrepreneur Duke Technologies Inc. uses computer-aided design graphics and invested heavy capital into purchasing this high-tech rapid prototyping technology. The company makes it available to Central Coast small businesses, engineers, artists, students, inventors, entrepreneurs, new product designers, architects, et cetera.

The technology transfers computer data to equipment that melts plastic into thin layers -- similar to a magnetic resonance machine layered imaging -- and literally creates and builds the 3-D item. Once completed, the item can be painted, textured and more. Gone is the necessity to laboriously hand work, cut, weld or fabricate models or prototypes over weeks or months. This "stereo lithography" system can be one-third or less the cost of conventional demo parts/objects creation. Contact Duke for a consultation at (805) 291-2586 and beam me up, Scotty.

Marjorie Shields is an inventor/entrepreneur and a major force in the team created from an idea by Harold Adams to represent the Best of Santa Barbara online.
Initially envisioned as a simple hotel-restaurant directory, the www.SBLife.com has grown to be quite comprehensive, and includes wineries, bed-and-breakfasts, sports, activities, weddings, auto services, art galleries and much more. What makes this whole production innovative and unique is a large variety of short movie files of local businesses, events and attractions, a visual immersion in more than 50 subjects reflecting the Best of Santa Barbara's offerings to residents and tourists.

A high quality "video postcard" DVD is also created by SBLife.com and is titled "The Santa Barbara Movie Tours DVD." It is available at gift stores and online. So check out the ambiance and flavor of Santa Barbara and call 692-2005.

One of the premier institutions in our region is the UCSB Center for Entrepreneurship and Engineering Management (CEEM), whose mission is to develop and commercialize the high-tech innovations of undergraduates and postgraduates.

CEEM recently completed two programs important to Central Coast business communities. On April 25-26, CEEM conducted Entrepreneurship 101 Seminar: Innovation -- The Value Imperative, which featured many top speakers in business and technology. The program included reviews of UCSB developments and success stories. CEEM director Tim Schwartz points out that during the past three years, UCSB spinoffs have attracted more than $600 million in new venture funding.

The annual 2003 Business Plan Competition concluded on May 14 with cash prizes were awarded to winners. The plans started from 17 teams over a period of six months. The competition provides UCSB student entrepreneurs with opportunities for teamwork, creativity, networking, leadership, authentic practical experiences, and meaningful financial incentives. Six teams of finalists each made a 10-minute formal "pitch" to a panel of four judges: Tom Bruggere, founder, Mentor Graphics Corp.; John Dorman, CEO, Digital Insight Corporation; Jim Mitchell, founder, Meier Mitchell and Co.; and Kevin O'Connor, co-founder and chairman, Doubleclick.

Four of the six finalist teams were offered business plans in the biomedical or environmental enhancement areas. The winners are: $10,000 first prize, Patrick Dietzen, Brent Gaylord with Sirigen Inc.; $5,000 second prize, Marco A. Mena and Ryan M. van Zanten with Advanced Encapsulation Inc.; $2,500 third prize, Christopher Erro and Sunil Kaki with Nomos Technologies; $500 finalists awards, Bren School Ph.D. candidate [Daniel Brooks] with Source Tracker, Amit Jardosh and Niranjan Shetty with Median Systems, and Ryan Patrick Aubry with Transnet.

Hearty congratulations to all! For additional information call Tim Schwartz at 893-4613.

Alan A. Tratner is with Inventors Workshop International and Incubators 2000. Incubators 2000 can be reached at 879-1729 and Inventors Workshop International at 962-5722. The groups present a free public expert business resources panel at the Eastside branch of the Santa Barbara Public Library, 1102 E. Montecito St., at 5:30 p.m. on the first Wednesday of every month.