

Michael Hewitt takes on **Arnold Schwarzenegger** armed only with some menacing sheep.

Ewe'll be sorry, Arnie



Late last year, the broadsheets reported on an Oxford professor who, in response to complaints from bunny-huggers that the use of sheep dogs was cruel because they frightened the sheep, invented a non-threatening robotic herder. It

performed exactly to spec. Indeed, so non-threatening was it, the sheep became positively contemptuous of the thing, and began attacking it. Now it herds ducks.

Which makes me wonder about the Doomsday scenario, as propounded by such as Professor Kevin Warwick, of Reading University. Warwick, you may recall, was interviewed by PCW a few months ago. In that piece, he claimed, within our lifetime, a Terminator scenario will occur, whereby computer-controlled robots will subjugate humanity and take over the world. Those of us who survive, it seems, will be castrated, lobotomised, and forced to live like battery hens, albeit without the happy prospect of ending up as a self-basting product in Waitrose.

Question, though: why should a computer want to divest us of our gonads and take over the world? I've used quite a few software suites in my time, and none of them has shown the slightest inclination to enslave or attack me. OK, I've had the occasional argument with a spellchecker, but none that wasn't settled amicably. And, as far as I'm aware, few existing computer programs contain an 'Off with his goolies/lobotomise him' sub-routine. So it would require a human programmer to incorporate this into his world domination software. But even if that program came free on a cover CD, would anyone want to run it?

True, Warwick suggests that human intervention might not actually be necessary. He says that, as computers become more sophisticated, they'll eventually become both conscious and, ultimately, more intelligent than humans. It's when they're conscious and exceed us in intelligence, and they're connected to an ultra-sophisticated network, that the ordure apparently hits the fan. Because hanging off this network will be computer-controlled robotic devices, including pilotless warplanes, tanks, and 'intelligent' nuclear bombs. The crunch point comes when a computer operator with an

IQ of 150 tells a computer with an IQ of 250, to, for instance, download a nude picture of Jennifer Aniston from the internet. 'Sod that,' says the computer, 'I'd rather download a tasteful .gif of a bare circuit-board instead.' 'Who's the boss here?' asks the operator, 'you or me?' The computer thinks for a nanosecond, then, via its network, instructs all peripheral computers and their robotic devices to wipe out humanity, retaining just a few for menial tasks. Then it downloads its .gif.

On the face of it, it makes a little sense. How would you react, if a chicken came along and started clucking orders at you? Probably a certain amused indulgence initially. But you'd eventually reach for the Paxo.

I've two problems with this, though. The first is Warwick supposes, in acquiring intelligence and consciousness, the computers will acquire negative human traits, too, such as hatred, paranoia, and ambition. But surely that's like saying they could acquire a taste for kebabs, isn't it? Logically, they can't. The liking for kebabs is a purely human thing (and even then it isn't universal), in the same way that hate, paranoia, and ambition are. They couldn't ever be facets of a

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computer mind, even the most sophisticated.

But my main objection to the Doomsday scenario is simply this: before they develop a machine that's as intelligent as an average human, inevitably they're going to develop one that isn't quite. Any latent Armageddon-unleashing instincts should be observable at this stage, while the machine is still too thick to stop its plug being pulled. We'll therefore be able to build in failsafe measures which can be incorporated into the more advanced models. So fear not. In any case, given the fate of the robotic sheep-herder, I'd say Warwick's being a tad pessimistic. If a 6ft 3 cyborg with an Austrian accent does put in an appearance in the near future, a couple of bad-tempered ewes should be enough to see him off.

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