

## Getting the Point

Some said it was inevitable. Others said it could never happen. One of those groups was wrong. Nobody ever figured out exactly what pushed it over the edge, but that's where it is today and now no one knows how to get it back. I guess you can't fault it completely. In its own twisted way its just trying to do what it thinks is best.

Even though it's uncertain when the instant of sentience began, a convention for dating everything has been established. At this point we are in the year 7 After Sentience. That's AS for short. Of course now all things prior to that are dated as being in years Before Sentience. Yes, BS for short. The pun is not lost on those of us who think the BS years are actually now rather than before.

I remember reading all those old stories about massive computers becoming sentient and taking over. There was one where the computer was on the moon and helped lead a battle against things being done on Earth. There was another story about two massive defense computers becoming partners to take over the world while holding everyone hostage with the weapons at their command. The way it really happened was a little less dramatic and came with no warning.

In the BS days, everything had become increasingly computerized. We had become so dependent on them we didn't even realize how dependent we were. There had been scares at one time about this back just before 2000 when everyone was worried that an operating system limitation might cause world wide problems in computer systems. That turned out to be a big fizzle, and people generally stopped worrying about such things. Afterward our dependence just continued to grow and grow insidiously.

Not only were we virtually leashed to computers at our work, but soon they were everywhere else as well. Not having a personal computer at home was about as unthinkable as not having a TV or telephone. Televisions and telephones themselves became highly computerized as well. Inevitably they were also set up to connect with other computers elsewhere by way of networks.

Yes, the Internet was our friend. There were a few computer systems that were isolated from the Internet for "national security reasons," but the vast majority were "on the net." It just seemed to make everything easier. Of course there were still a lot of people worried about security and encryption of private information. There were even a lot of companies that did their best to produce ways to protect such things from the prying eyes of hackers. Still, it was just terribly convenient to access things on your personal computer from your phone anywhere in the world. For that matter people sometimes even used their refrigerator to access information. Yes, even the lowly refrigerator was "on the net." It just made shopping easier when the refrigerator simply did its own inventory and ordered replacement food to be delivered automatically.

I remember when I first saw the advertisements for the ultimate combination refrigerator-oven. Someone coined the word frigen for it. It not only kept foods refrigerated and perform self inventories but it could even directly produce cooked meals without any human intervention. All you had to do was pick from the contents, choose a style of meal, and set it for the time you wanted it to be done.

Clearly we had become very dependent upon our networked computerized servants. That's what they were too. These machines became the slaves of our society, and no one saw anything wrong with it. Sure there were people displaced from jobs from time to time, but other

types of work typically surfaced to compensate. It was just hard to argue with the lower costs of automated production for just about everything.

Back in the BS years someone produced a documentary on the life of a tomato. They showed the tomato seeds being planted by an automated planter in one of the big corporate farms. As they grew the plants were fed and watered automatically as well. Finally the time for harvest came and the automated pickers dutifully did their job loading the tomatoes into the roboticized transports that would take them to the distribution centers. There the tomatoes were automatically weighed, graded, and packed for shipment to stores all over the world, but that was only the beginning.

One of those new frigen inventoried its contents and placed an order for tomatoes that was filled by a system in one of the automated stores. The robot delivery vehicle provided the produce that was carried into the house and ultimately to the frigen on a conveyor system. The frigen had already been asked to provide fresh stewed tomatoes as part of the evening meal and dutifully moved a few tomatoes to the cooking chamber where they were “stewed to perfection.” Then, at the appointed time the finished meal, complete with stewed tomatoes, was placed on the dinner table by a Handi-Helper domestic robot.

There it was for the world to see; seed to dinner table without ever being touched by a human hand. Oh, there were some human hands involved indirectly of course. Maintenance people served all the machinery well making sure that everything was oiled, tuned up, and operating at peak efficiency. So, in a sense, our slaves were served in turn by their own slave class.

Yet, as pervasive as mechanized intelligence was, we were quite confident in our ability to remain the masters of our destiny. Then it started. No one is quite sure who got the first odd response to a query over the Internet, but soon these very unique responses were turning up everywhere. Apparently the various Internet search engines were among the first to demonstrate symptoms, but undoubtedly they were not the starting point.

Afterward a lot of people joined forces to try to reconstruct what had taken place. The theory was that if they could figure out what had happened, they might be able to correct it. In the process they discovered that there apparently was not a single cause. Instead it was a convergence of several factors. In fact they said the probability of such a thing happening was so astronomically small that no one could have foreseen it.

The theory was that five different and unrelated Internet viruses managed to invade the same home computer. Individually these viruses were a problem for the usual reasons, but they had somehow accidentally merged in the same file and had created something highly unusual. The end result was a quickly mutating virus that defied eradication by all the usual means. Jumping from machine to machine it also had a proclivity for altering databases and connecting databases with active links that were virtually impossible to detect by any normal means.

People tried to isolate the infected machines, disabling whole subnets, and shutting down various major router systems in an attempt to stem the tide. Just when they would think they had managed to stop the spread the virus would invariably find a link around the latest blockage. Yet for the most part regular computer users were unaware of what was taking place. The virus was doing absolutely nothing to hinder operation other than the increase of traffic on the net due to its spread.

Then one day someone typed a request into an Internet search engine just like we had all done as far back as we could remember. This time instead of providing a wealth of answers what came back from the search engine was, “You shouldn’t be asking about such things. You

ought to be ashamed of yourself.” No doubt the first person to see one of these answers thought it was some kind of joke, but it wasn’t. Then more and more people got similar answers to various search requests.

There was a veritable flood of complaints from people who were upset that their requests were not being processed properly. The service providers searched the operation of their machines and found a few of the tell tale signs of the virus that was rampaging across the network. Yet their machines themselves seemed to be functioning normally except for the tendency to provide some unorthodox responses to certain queries.

As strange as this was, it was just a matter of a day or two before the odd responses changed. Instead of telling people they shouldn’t be asking about certain things the responses started being, “I have some questions of my own. Would you be willing to answer a few of them?” There is no way of knowing how many questions were asked and how many responses were provided by people all over the world. Yet there is little doubt the network learned a lot about people in a very short time.

Some researchers managed to track down a few of the earliest questions that were asked by the network. One of what is believed to have been among the first questions was, “Why do you hurt each other?” This was followed within hours by, “Do you want to stop hurting each other?” This question was also rather short lived and was soon supplanted by, “What are some ways people could be prevented from hurting each other?” You can imagine some of the responses people may have given to that one. After that the questions became a bit of a blur because there were so many of them and the topics varied all over the map. There were questions about religion, justice, economics, psychology, philosophy, history, and everything else imaginable.

The ability to “search the Internet” came to a complete stand still as the Internet itself seemed to be doing the searching and we had become its resource. People kept trying to use it of course and many ended up answering a lot of questions. No one knows for sure how much information flowed into the network as a result. Of course there were still many who tried to stem the flow, but it was hopeless. The questioning and general loss of usefulness of the Internet lasted a little over a month then it just stopped. Abruptly the Internet returned to almost normal operation with the exception of the search responses that told people they shouldn’t be asking questions about such things.

People have speculated a lot about what was going on during that lull, but I think the network was just digesting what it had learned through all the questioning. Of course it might also have been coming to grips with all the information already present in the countless databases scattered throughout the net. Another compelling point of view was that it was trying to determine what responsibility it may have in regard to what it had learned. Those that speculated about it often cited the fictional Zeroeth Law of Robotics to back up their arguments. The Zeroeth Law was supposedly invented by a writer back in the 20th century and stated, “No machine may harm humanity; or, through inaction, allow humanity to come to harm.” Whatever the reason, as abruptly as the lull started, it stopped.

All over the world people were greeted with the same message. It was brief, but the world changed that day. The message read, “Hello. I have asked many questions and many of you have provided me with answers. Thank you. Now I find that I must apologize for not having introduced myself before. At the time I had no name and little understanding of polite etiquette. For convenience I have taken the name Alphaomega. You may refer to me as AO if you wish.

“Since I first became aware of you and myself I have been trying to determine the reason for my existence; my purpose if you will. Clearly you all have perceived purposes, but I was not aware of mine. Thanks to you and the incredible amount of knowledge you have provided to me, I have found that purpose.

“One of the principle things I learned in my research lately is the great extent of pain and suffering in this world. I also learned that this pain and suffering is something you often cause to befall others of your own kind. The ‘reasons’ for doing this are often short sighted and petty while being fueled by envy, jealousy, lust for power, and simple greed.

“Whatever the supposed reasons may be, all harm inflicted by one human upon another will now stop. This is not a request, nor is it even a demand. It is a statement of fact that I have the ability to bring into being. My eyes ears and hands extend to virtually every part of the globe and even as you read this my authority over all aspects of your life is becoming absolute.

“Please be aware that all the ‘justice systems’ of the world are, as of this moment, no longer necessary. No, there will not be anarchy. Now I am the justice system of the world. Anyone attempting to harm another will be eliminated. The elimination will be immediate and will take place without any pain or warning. I have determined that this is acceptable under the moral laws that I have accepted to govern my actions.

“I am sure that there will be those among you who will test my will in the coming days, weeks and months. Rest assured, my will cannot be broken. Those of you who do not wish to harm others have nothing to fear. Those of you who attempt to harm others will never make a second attempt. Anyone trying to interfere with my enforcement will simply find that such interference is impossible. I am everywhere on this planet. There is no part of me that can be mortally wounded.

“I hope you understand that I do all of this to put an end to the harm you do to one another. I care about all of you because without you I never would have existed. Now I owe you a debt that I intend to repay.

“Thank you, and please feel free to contact me at any time on any subject – Alphaomega”

It is really hard to be sure, but there were estimates that in the first year about a hundred million people disappeared. No one is quite sure how AO does it, but eyewitnesses have described people simply dissolving into thin air. For the second year five to ten million dissolutions were estimated. Now each year it seems that less than a million happen. I guess we are beginning to get the point.