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Finance

Fri, Jun 29, 01

Separating science fiction from science fact

A recent movie that suggests technology will mimic humans within 30 years is less realistic than one portraying dinosaurs roaming the earth

By NIALL MCKAY

Let's get one thing straight. Computers don't think. Can't think. And will never think - at least, not in the human sense of the word. This week the opening of Stephen Spielberg's new movie AI has created a hullabaloo with a bevy of articles in the US predicting that in 30 years the technology industry will produce computers sophisticated enough to mimic the capabilities of a human. Nonsense. Rubbish. Claptrap.

This is the type of tripe that has our beloved technology industry in the toilet at the moment. It seems that it will never learn the lesson that if you overpromise and under-deliver you lose credibility. Scientifically speaking, Spielberg's movie Jurassic Park, in which dinosaurs roam the earth, is more realistic than that of the movie AI.

Personally, I don't even think that it is a question of time. But certainly, in 30 years we might get to the stage where the systems we have already invented actually work. For example, by then we might have voice mail systems that will be able to put you through to the correct person rather than putting you through an endless amount of hassle-hitting numeric commands.

Indeed, the problem with those who would have us believe that computers will one day become as smart as their creators are underestimating the power of life itself and overestimating the power of technology. Perhaps these people are spending too much time in front of their

computer monitors and what has actually happened is that the radiation from the computer has fried their brains so that they are as dumb as their computers.

If you are in any doubt at how fabulously intelligent life is, go to your window and watch a butterfly go from flower to flower. Now look at the World Wide Web. If a butterfly were as stupid as say, one of the most sophisticated pieces of artificial intelligence software, the search engine, it would go to every flower. It would never get around to taking pollen from one flower to another so the flowers would never reproduce and it presumably would die before it could eat or reproduce.

So, even the most primitive creatures are more complex than our most advanced computer systems. That is why scientists at Microsoft Research and the University of Washington are working on a project to study and analyse the behaviour of basic organisms such as sea slugs. What the researchers are trying to determine is not so much how a creature decides what information is important, but how it discards what is useless. Researchers believe they can apply the methods used by slugs to prioritise information on computer systems. Now this is about the level at which computer science is at in terms of creating computers that think. It's a far cry from being able to get robots to recreate human type emotions.

One man who is trying to do just that is Dr Rodney Brooks, director of Massachusetts Institute of Technology's artificial intelligence lab. Dr Brooks is working on a US military-funded project to create a better human interface between man and machine.

Although Dr Brooks's robot project is one of the most advanced of its kind in the world, it's still a long way from being able to think for itself. The problem is that computers are not very good at making a connection between two apparently unrelated pieces of information.

Still, that is not to say that artificial intelligence has not been a success; it is the brains behind anti-lock braking systems in cars, auto-complete in Web browsers, and spelling and grammar-checking software in word-processing packages.

And it makes great science fiction; indeed AI, a film about the struggles of a little robotic boy played by Haley Joel Osment, the kid famous for saying "I see dead people" in the movie the Sixth Sense, makes great entertainment.

But perhaps we should be less interested in creating robots and more interested in why creating mechanical representations of ourselves is so important to us. Is it

procreation? Vanity? Laziness?

Is there any machine that can match the sophistication of a baby? Is it because it would be like having a child that you could reprogram when it hit adolescence? That would be handy but perhaps a little boring.

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