Robotcolypse: When the robots take over

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Well, friends, it appears the end is almost upon us. I'm not even referring to the end of the world a la the Mayan Calendar but rather an entirely different kind of a not-so-hostile takeover: robots.

Talk to you when you're lonely

We've touched on robots taking over before [1], but this time, it's getting serious. This robot was designed to actually replace humans. The Kibo Robot Project [2] is a collaboration aiming to create a robot to counter the problem of leading increasingly solitary lifestyles due to advancements—somewhat ironically—in communication platforms. Well folks, we've more or less brought this on ourselves.

Right now, the aim of the project is to provide company for astronauts that are isolated at the International Space Station. But, in theory, this could also cater to the elderly or anyone else who is isolated from human companionship. According to the website, the main objective of the robot is to create something that allows humans to feel a connection to something in the event that the human is isolated from other human beings. Standing at 13 inches tall, the robot is designed to look humanoid. It will serve no mechanical purpose on the ISS -- just an emotional support role -- and will also tweet news and messages back to Japan when there are no Japanese astronauts aboard—they're only there for about six months per year.

Fun fact: Kibo means Hope in Japanese. Possibly as in, we *hope* these robots don't take over and destroy the human race.

Take your kids to Disney Land

Just kidding, these robots can't actually parent your kids—sorry about that—but they can play catch with them if you visit the theme park. The wonder engineers at Disney [3] realized that even though robots playing catch or interacting with each other is fairly common, they could engineer robots to interact with park visitors. Starting with Microsoft Kinect—switching later to Xtion Pro Live—the designers came up with a blueprint for a humanoid robot, complete with hands, that was able

to both catch and toss a ball from a human participant. The system tracks both the moving ball and the participant's head, so it's always correctly oriented towards the thrower. What happens if the robot misses? Don't worry -- it uses its creepy face to shake its head in disapproval, shrug its shoulders, or look around for the ball. Great, it's athletic AND judgmental.

Blend in with the normals

The one thing we have over the robots right now is they're usually pretty easy to identify. Even humanoid robots don't look quite human. But, at MIT, they're in the beginning stages of creating a robot that could be, well, anything. The device, called a milli-motein as homage to the small components and the movement qualities of protein-- is only on a small scale right now but has great future potential. Basically, the robot can fold itself into any shape imaginable. It works, according to MIT [4], by using "a series of permanent magnets paired with electromagnets are arranged in a circle; they drive a steel ring that's situated around them." Reconfigurable robots could be the boogymen of the future.

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