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Mind over robots

From: werd@interlog.com (Drew Williamson)
 Date: Sat, 28 Jun 1997 22:32:47 -0400 (EDT)
 Fwd Date: Sat, 28 Jun 1997 23:41:27 -0400
 Subject: Mind over robots

SOURCE: Toronto Globe and Mail
 DATE: June 28, 1997
 SECTION: Mind & Matter

by Geoff Olson

Leaving Las Vegas with
 gamblers' dream unresolved

PRINCETON University scientist Brenda J. Dunne is showing a film in which a squat little robot on three wheels meanders haphazardly across a table, its movements controlled by a random-event generator. We are at the annual meeting of the Society for Scientific Exploration, a convocation of lettered scholars that this year gathered in a Las Vegas hotel to examine phenomena on the fringe—UFOs, parapsychology, alternative medical practices, and the like.

Professor Dunne's R2D2-style robot is the centrepiece of a series of experiments designed to study what researchers call "human/machine anomalies. Stated simply the focus of the work is to determine whether human subjects can affect the movements of a mechanical device—pushing it toward them or away—merely through concentration.

"It's controversial, it's true," says Prof. Dunne, of Princeton University's Engineering Anomalies Research lab (PEAR). "I think doing the work at Princeton makes people pay attention a little bit more than if it was done somewhere else." Her co-researcher, Robert Jahn, formed the lab in 1979 when he was dean of engineering to research the role of consciousness in the physical world.

In their experiments, human subjects attempt to influence the behaviour of a variety of devices. The researchers say half a million test runs show "unmistakable evidence" that machines can be affected by what is believed to be human consciousness—or, as PEAR itself puts it: an extremely minute, but statistically measurable, ability of the mind to skew the output of electronic

number generators and other devices." It sounds spooky, in a dry, academic way.

Prof. Dunne's recent work with the robot was inspired by another researcher's efforts to detect animal/machine anomalies. A randomly moving robot was introduced to newly hatched baby chicks, who imprinted on the device. The birds were set in a mesh enclosure in a corner of a room and the robot was left to ramble. The goal of the experiment was to determine whether the chicks' emotional link with their cybermother would influence the robot to stay closer to them. The results suggested overwhelmingly that the chicks did have some effect on the machine.

"We don't even use the word psychokinesis, one reason being that the word has a lot of negative connotations-it's New Agey," says Prof. Dunne. We just speak of human/machine anomalies." She adds that the "psycho" part of psychokinesis is problematic in itself, and that "kinesis means an energy or force of some sort, and we're certainly not dealing with an energy of any sort that we currently know."

Prof. Jahn, who also attended the Las Vegas conference, says data from 13 separate experiments over 11 years suggest that you're looking at less than a part in a trillion" of the results being due to chance alone. "That is overwhelming," he says. There are even gender effects: Women do better than men in influencing machines.

The purported phenomenon has a real-world side. If mind can influence machine, then it raises real issues for sensitive electronic controls in aircraft. There are also the commercial possibilities: At the PEAR Inc. Web page (<http://www.pearinc.com/xpost-sc.html>), for example, you can download ShapeChanger software for just \$24.95. The program tests your power with human/machine anomalies on your home computer: The object is to will" one pre-selected image to appear on your monitor instead of another.

The research has drawn its share of skepticism. And there's no doubt that conclusive proof of human/machine interactions would have the potential of being a materialist's worst nightmare: that consciousness and cosmos are inextricable. It's like Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle -- that the act of observation changes what is being observed-with a vengeance.

Prof. Jahn regards his work as having the potential to offer a new understanding of the workings of the material world: "This is the real excitement, I think to us, that we're not just looking at cute little anomalies or aberrations within the field of human/machine interactions. We're seeing the floating debris, if you will, that presages a much more substantial overall concept of science to include subjective dimensions as well as objective dimensions.

Does the theory offer hope for gamblers longing to beat the odds in Las Vegas? "Gamblers throughout history have believed they could affect the outcome of a

random process like rolling dice or shuffling cards," Prof. Dunne wrote in 1992.

"The phenomenon we're measuring is a lot more subtle, but it's the same idea and we've measured it in the laboratory."

But it shows itself only after many thousands of trials, and the deviations aren't enough to break casinos. Not unexpectedly, I saw no one from the conference at the gaming tables or slot machines.

Geoff Olson writes on science-related controversies for The Vancouver Courier.

Drew Williamson

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