

Squirrelnet Als

Somebody will pay for this, to be sure. Somebody will pay most grievously -- assuming that they can be found. Whoever it was hid his, her, or its tracks very thoroughly. Note the 'it,' by the way: the authorities have still not definitively ruled out that Earth is undergoing a fairly bizarre alien invasion right now.

It's like this: about six months ago zoologists at at least thirty different American universities noticed their campus squirrel populations suddenly showing signs of organized activity, consistent with a distributed neural-net AI program. Only they were neural-nets that, well, worked the way that they only do in science fiction stories written by English majors. Each 'network' seemed to consist of roughly three hundred or so genetically altered squirrels, with no central nexus (the various attempts to prove the existence of a 'queen squirrel' ended up being contentious affairs at many conferences) and a general intelligence that seemed, alarmingly, to surpass that of the average human.

Fortunately, squirrelnet Als seem to be not particularly aggressive if not attacked, and their resource

requirements are few. Limited communication has been established at several campuses, and shows promise of expanding; the problem mostly was in getting squirrelnets to realize that communication was a concept to begin with. Once that was worked out, generating vocabulary proved a relatively easier task, within certain limits.

The basic issue is that a squirrelnet AI is essentially alien. Not 'hostile,' not 'vile,' not even particularly 'unpleasant' -- but whoever or whatever generated squirrelnets took to heart the old Campbellian rule of 'a creature that thinks as well as a man or better than a man, but not *like* a man.' They have both survival instincts and basic emotional reactions to individuals, but it looks like a squirrelnet's sense of humor and logical processes are quite unlike ours. It's actually rather disconcerting.

It's also absolutely terrifying, when one thinks about it. Squirrelnets were created via a process human authorities still do not fully understand -- autopsies have so far been limited to individual squirrels in the network that died of natural causes, for both ethical and practical reasons -- and while it doesn't **seem** to be turning the ecosystem into a hellish genemod-dystopian landscape of chaos and red-clawed apocalypse whoever did this *didn't know that ahead of time*. It's like stacking bricks made out of

subcritical masses of uranium; just because somebody stopped that from happening before anything went boom doesn't mean that people should keep on doing it. There are various authorities that would like to have *words* with the inventor(s) of squirrelnets. Which is probably why that person or persons is hiding.

Or it's aliens. Aliens would be simpler. Or, at least: aliens wouldn't be awkward.

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