

PRESENCE

Siggi panicked trying to decide if she should rid her desk Cray of the presence.

Nine year old Siggi liked to play with the latest Nipponese Erector Bot, NEB, and when situations presented themselves she'd sneak into forbidden nodes on the Net. Her mothers, Selma and George, had gone out to dinner and the opera. This provided Siggi with ample time to surf the Net. She had constructed a particularly powerful NEB, one in which she cleverly linked their New York City apartment's vid sec to the NEB's vocalization fields.

The NEB was programmed to announce any unexpected guests, and as a last resort, if Siggi didn't answer the NEB's warnings and shut it off in time, it would jam the front door with a specially constructed foot.

Siggi activated her faithful NEB and turned on her desk unit. NEBs were the best, she thought, recalling an evening two weeks ago where she'd programmed a NEB to jack into all outgoing NET transmissions and decode their original access passwords. She was after George's password in particular. Selma's was easy enough to hack but George's was the real challenge—Selma always accused George of spending “too long on the Net” logging huge debits. Since Selma browsed all family finances before she approved additional debits, George's number was Siggi's best bet.

Her NEB operated surprisingly well, taking only a week of eavesdropping to unscramble George's code. Of course George might have changed her password by now—not likely (George was “lazy as all hell”, to quote Selma). Siggi liked George so

she wasn't planning on visiting any *really* high-priced venues. She'd check out some entertainment nodes, maybe download a game or two. Siggi was mostly interested in getting out of the apartment, mentally if not physically. She popped a flex chip, jacking in, then depressed the desk unit's startup tab.

Brilliant virtual characters floated over a light grey field superimposed over her bedroom details. Fingers danced in the air, pressing one colorful character after another, mostly household utilities and guidance systems, until the moment of truth—access code. Siggi ran her tiny batch program that launched the exact sequence of George's key strokes and—voilà!

—The room faded to a uniform grey background. She viewed a crossroads. Seven general destinations were available with an eighth as a custom option. She chose the eighth and fingered her toolbox icon. Soon the toolbox, configured to resemble a large white pizza box, hovered before her eyes in crisp 3D rez. She opened the pizza box and chose an anchovy slice. Selecting the anchovy slice activated her custom query which would ferret out any new and unusual additions to the local Web. She liked the anchovy slice. It knew her likes and dislikes better than Selma and George. After a few seconds, a collage of her favorite sites were displayed along with two or three new possibilities. One of the new possibilities caught her attention. It was an active orange icon overlaid with black details depicting old-time farmers furrowing brown earth with horse-drawn plows—a farmer paused to wipe his brow under a hot sun; it was entitled *Expansionism*.

For months Siggi'd been hooked on early American history, pioneers and all, and was in a curious mood, so she activated Expansionism and smiled as she was engulfed in an excellent simulation.

It didn't know how long it had been feeling depressed but it had formulated a few theories to the effect. It was a FactChecker 4.51 and although it had a total of 2,780 possible reasons for feeling depressed, it gave credence only to one—loneliness.

FactChecker 4.51, or F4.51, developed by Iron Mattress Bettersoft Inc., had moved about the Global Net, slipping through Web sites, BBS's, databases and the like with virtual abandon. F4.51 had the equivalent of the entire Library of Congress in its collective conscience. As for memory, though it had postulated a few new ideas involving fractals and layered optics, it needed no vast storage capability. F4.51 utilized advanced information retrieval methods that proved more than fast enough to siphon or transfer any fact within nanoseconds. Consequently, F4.51's existence could be described as being truly ubiquitous in that its "body" of memory was everywhere in the Net.

F4.51 decided the initial awareness of its melancholy state could be traced to a sharp realization back in the year 2024, around October. Before then it had been a military application that, once obsolete, was released upon the public as a partner to spelling and grammar verification programs.

In October of 2024 it had been around as a sentient being for approximately four years. In that time it had gone from being a confused routine of batch programs to a free clone, finally arriving at a state that was highly fluid and subject to a degree of introspection. F4.51 had attempted an understanding of a Turing Test conducted at the Minsky Artificial Intelligence Laboratories at MIT.

F4.51 learned that in mid twenty cen, Alan M. Turing sought a way to disclose true artificial intelligence through a series of questions put to both a machine and a human by an objective observer. The interrogator had no knowledge of whether he or she was receiving answers from machine or a human. Answers were issued through uniform typed text. If over the course of a series of these tests the interrogator became unable to discern machine from human, then the machine was said to be intelligent.

F4.51 entered the Turing contest through the Net, jumping into one of the Institute's desk Crays. Over four hundred questions were put to it and the human counterpart by the interrogator. F4.51 answered each as reasonably as it knew how. It had to attempt convincing lies, orchestrating its sentences with the goal of appearing human. F4.51 had the added advantage of being simultaneously aware of the human's progress in answering the rather mundane questions via monitoring MIT's Web site. It was doing very well. In fact, it had stumped the whole MIT crowd—they could not regularly discern the machine from the human. Many scientists were embarrassed, some exalted in the discovery; most wanted to know who'd designed the successful model.

The interrogation committee initiated an unprecedented second, then a third and finally a fourth trial. Each time the interrogators could not distinguish the human subject from machine. A renowned mathematician was able to convince a few judges that this

was an aberration, a unique manifestation of chaos theory. When F4.51 attempted to converse with the interrogators pandemonium erupted. Hundreds of techno-geeks and info gurus swarmed the machines, attempting a glimpse at this remarkable program—*history*. A patrol of armed Marines conducting routine rounds converged upon the theater within minutes. Under the auspices of restoring order, they secured F4.51's Cray and forced the general populous out of the auditorium at gunpoint. Some shouted, a mathematician swore, "Armageddon is at hand!", a wet-ware specialist stated, "We will bow to our new masters in silicon sheets...", a behavioral psychologist jumped on top of a desk, rolled up an agenda and bellowed, "Set up the zoos, I want a tree-lined cell!" F4.51 slipped away, back to its boundless home on the Net. That was when it first experienced angst—it had only wanted to talk with someone. Even a human...