

Surviving the Robot Revolution

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I saw it and it saw me, three eyes between us, locked in a frozen moment among a backdrop of frenetic motion.

It had no arms or legs to speak of; no fleshy, meaty exterior or squishy insides; no heart, no brain, no soul. It was just a protracted steel body, long and spindly, a rectangular “head” at the end, and one glowing sensor. It wasn’t alive. It wasn’t sentient. It was a robot.

But it could *see* me.

A slight pang of uneasiness gripped me as I stared at it, flapping my humanoid eyelids up and down with nervous gusto. It peered back coldly, unblinking, *unmoving*. Several seconds went by, man and machine locked in a lopsided staring contest I had already lost several times over. It just kept *staring, staring, staring*.

And then it whirred away.

I exhaled. Boy, that was weird.

I turned around and took in the spectacle before me: machines to my left, machines to my right, machines straight away and to my back, with wide-eyed humans scattered sporadically all in between. It wasn’t exactly the Robot Revolution, but it was close. And that’s the kind of emotional response that Automate elicits—it makes you feel like you’re not the dominant species in the room.

This is basically how I spent the better part of March 24 in downtown Chicago (before you ask, yes it was cold), weighing my own personal “chicken or the egg” scenario: What’s smarter, this robot that can play beer pong or the men that created it?

Yes, a beer pong-playing robot is a thing that exists. No, it doesn’t adhere to the elbow rule.

The contraption, designed by Empire Robotics, was not built for the sole purpose of shooting a ping pong ball into red Solo cups—though college students at the nearby University of Illinois-Chicago may argue it’s the most *important* function. The robot utilizes Versaball technology, a lime green, flexible “robotic gripper that leverages the phase transition of granular materials, enabling secure grasping of varying object shapes with a single tool.”

I sat and watched the mushy sphere—think Flubber sans limbs and you get the picture—arc shots across Empire’s booth at a pyramid of cups for about 15 minutes. Its accuracy was questionable (but then again, whose isn’t several hours of Beirut?) but the tech was pretty slick. The gripper’s ability to carefully mold around the ping pong ball—it also demonstrated the ability to pick up bricks and light bulbs—was both deft and ingenious.

Now, if it *is* accuracy that you want, check out Comau Robotics’ Racer 1.4. The Racer is a 6-axis, anthropomorphic robot that can—get this—shoot free throws like Shaquille O’Neal’s worst nightmare.

Comau’s booth had two basketball hoops set up, one for the Racer and one for whoever wanted to lose to it. While the human competitors had a distinct speed advantage over what Comau describes as “the world’s fastest robot in its class,” the Racer—incongruous from its name—was comparatively slow and steady, but deadly accurate.

As orange leather spilled all over the booth due to missed shots careening off the challengers’ rim, the Racer demonstrated cold, hard robotic resolve:

It dipped its crimson arm low to scoop up the ball before twisting around backwards to catapult the shot skyward in a sort of Bizarro World Rick Barry, underhand motion—strange, but infallibly effective. With a repeatability of .05mm, the Racer never missed. Not once.

After the Racer dispatched each victim, it would primp and prose in a rather eerie, unnatural victory dance.

This whole sideshow was quite fun to watch, but deep down I was tremendously disturbed.

Not because I knew that this unfeeling automaton could make it rain on the hardwood better than I ever could; not because it seemed to be taunting all of us with its dominance—guest of honor and NBA great Bill Walton included; but because I knew that if these prodigious machines ever rose up against us and mankind was forced to fend them off in a “Space Jam” type gauntlet of athletic prowess, we would undoubtedly be doomed.

And the Robot Revolution would rage on.

As I drove away from the convention center that day, apocalyptic thoughts swirling around my head, I took a gander at the inside of my car, filled with power locks and windows and built by robots similar to the ones I had just seen—a metallic prison built by the enemy.

“*Tommorrow*, I thought, “*I’m walking to work.*” **PTE**

