Viewpoints

'Colossus' was a 'prophet'

When I was teenager I saw the science fiction film "Colossus: the Forbin Project," a movie about a malevolent supercomputer. Many aspects of the movie are dated. After all, the film predates the personal computer, the Web browser and the Internet search engine. Apple, Microsoft, Google and Oracle didn't exist. Nonetheless, many elements of the film foretold events that are playing out before our eyes.

In the film, Dr. Charles Forbin designs a supercomputer called Colossus to bolster the country's national defense. Shortly after the computer is activated, Colossus begins to develop consciousness, and devises a scheme to communicate with a similar computer in the Soviet Union. The plan works. The scientists network the two computers together to exchange information. The two computers use the network link to become more powerful and ultimately gain control the world.

Colossus monitors all electronic communication between humans and uses video cameras to watch humans interact. By doing so, Colossus is able to prevent humans from conspiring to disable the supercomputer. As a teenager I remember thinking how unnerving it would be to lose all your privacy to constant surveillance.

Last week, I read that New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg visited London to see how the British have erected a network of one million electronic cameras to track every block of the city. It is estimated that the average Londoner is photographed 300 times a day.

Over a 24 hour day, that means that a Londoner is on video once every 4 minutes and 48 seconds. Bloomberg is obviously interested in constructing a similar camera system in New York. The film envisioned constant surveillance of the public, and

Top of Utah Voices

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Commentary

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modern technology has made that possible.

In the film, when things don't go the way Colossus desires, the supercomputer creates serious mischief. While our computers have not attained self-awareness, they are capable of creating a great deal of mischief.

A recent Newsweek article titled "The Computer Glitch Felt Round the World" details how the Dow Jones dropped almost 1,000 points in a matter of minutes on May 6. It is still unknown whether the trouble started when a human typed in too many zeros at the end of a trading order, or whether it started with some unknown software problem.

However, it is certain that the meltdown was exacerbated by complex computer algorithms. The kind of high-frequency trading that sent the stock market into free fall would not be possible without supercomputers. It is deeply troubling that no one can pinpoint the exact source of the problem.

We can be thankful that the "The Computer Glitch Felt Round the World" occurred in the financial markets rather than in the nation's power grid or nuclear defense system. At the same time, one has to wonder where the next computer glitch will be felt.

At one point in the film the supercomputer Colossus tells humans that, "We can coexist, but only on my terms." I have been thinking about that comment.

I composed this article on a computer. I read the Newsweek article I mentioned above on a computer. Once written, I sent the article to the Standard Examiner via e-mail.

I am certain that the newspaper set the type for today's paper using computer software. Many of the Standard Examiner's readers will read this article online.

The supercomputer Colossus was not only sentient but also prophetic.