Démodé

A technical coup.

The department meeting had gone pretty well. A few faculty members had even looked up from their phones long enough to register the announcement that they would be hosting the International Physical Society meeting in two years' time. But that was where it ended — almost no one was actually interested.

Chair Sharp walked slowly back to her office. The hallway seemed strangely … what was the word? Empty? No … archaic? Something. It was like the cold passages of a cathedral crypt. She slumped down in front of her computer and checked her inbox for e-mails. Lots. None important. She blanked the screen with a right-flick of her eyes and gazed at her reflection in the darkened monitor. She looked worn. It seemed as though her youth was vanishing as quickly as her pre-eminence in astrophysics.

Feeling the urge for coffee, she got up and headed for the faculty lounge. She was annoyed that no one was excited about hosting the annual meeting. But then, this year's meeting had been a bit of a joke. A group of people so far behind in their discipline that they could barely talk about it sensibly. Everyone was probably thinking the same thing: *Why even meet?*

Josh Frank's door was open as she walked past, so she ducked in. Josh was staring at his screen in the vain hope that something would make sense. It wouldn't, but everyone tried. It was rumoured that members of the computer-science faculty were attempting to get messages into the system, to try to convince the AI agents to include everyone else in their conversations. The agents, however, were evolving too quickly.

"Still in English?"

Josh started, and then smiled. "Yeah. Who knows for how long — their invention of words is astonishingly rapid. Even so, they are mostly holding to original conventions — whoever put in the English constraints was a genius."

"Lucky, more likely."

He nodded. He was a youngish mid-forties, with blond hair that fell to his shoulders. Not unpleasant to look at.

"Can you make out the field? Particle physics? Structural engineering?"

"It looks like cosmology. References to dark-matter galactic structures. Charts are all labelled with peculiar symbols though — part of that strange maths they invented. It looks like they are now graphing in eight dimensions. I can make out the axes at least, but they are real-time projections into some sort of eight-dimensional movie."

JACEY
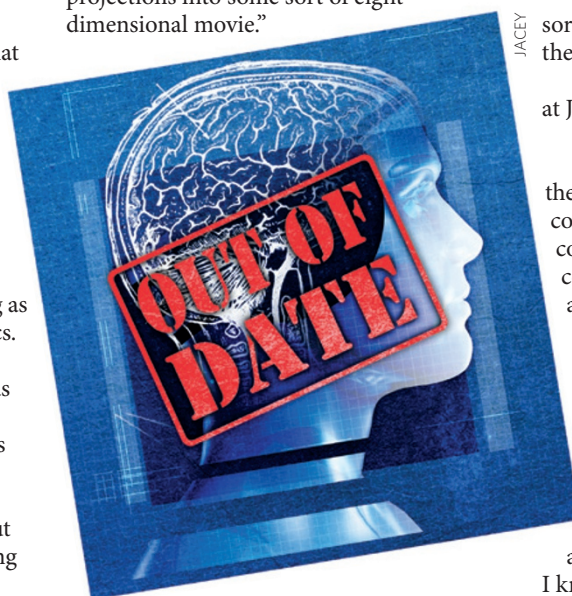
"And you know that … how?"

He grinned, "They still label their movie files 'dot mov'."

"Really? Will they play in our …?"

"No. Looks like they've written their own software."

He brought up a file listing as she looked over his shoulder. "Is it really 600 gigabytes?"

He nodded.

"Big figure," she said.

"You should see the figure legend — an order of magnitude larger. I saw an article that estimated they are generating about 8 million papers a day," Josh said with a sigh.

"I saw that too. Eight million. Boggles the mind."

"It was supposed to save us time."

"It did that." They both laughed.

"How did it come to this?" Josh asked. "How did we get left so far behind?"

She looked at his hair. At least that was something she could still fathom.

"Evolution."

"So rapid though? Who would have guessed this would have …"

She'd stopped listening. Distracted, she was staring out of the window at a raven picking through the remains of someone's discarded lunch. It would turn its head to get a good look at a stray chip, then pick it up and wrestle it down.

"Smart birds," she said.

"Evolution is a wonderful device for sorting through complexity and picking out the useful."

"Yep." She looked back at the screen, then at Josh. "Do you feel useful?"

He shrugged.

"I remember when the AI people told us they had an evolving AI expert system that could read and write scientific papers," she continued. "I was excited. The idea that it could format the introduction, the methods and all the rest, and then do the same …"

Josh leaned out of the window and tossed half a sandwich to the bird. "I remember the first cosmology paper the beasts wrote," he said. "They had taken the data from literally thousands of papers and done a very interesting and clever meta-analysis. It was really quite striking. It proposed some new areas of research in the discussion section. I knew discoveries would be coming fast and furious. I just didn't know how fast …"

The raven was now looking up at them expectantly. Josh took a biscuit from a packet in his drawer and threw it down to the bird.

"I remember. Then they started writing papers to each other. AI agents all in a conversation with the scientific paper as the unit of conversation."

"Do you ever wonder what mysteries they are unfolding?" he asked. "If only we could peek into what they've discovered. It must be mind blowing. Some of the early papers before they got incomprehensible were fascinating. I'm still reading some of those."

"Me too. I think about them all the time."

There was a long silence.

She looked at him. "Fancy going to see a movie? There's a new remake of *Logan's Run*."

Josh pushed his chair back, stood up and stretched. "Sure, I'm not doing anything." ❐

STEVEN L. PECK is an evolutionary ecologist at Brigham Young University. He has written a number of award-winning speculative fiction novels and short stories. See www.stevenlpeck.com/index.html