

# Tick-tock curly-wurly

Wha...?

**Gareth Owens**

Professor Michelle Tartuffe examined her reflection in the black glass of a fluorescent night-time bus ride. She insisted on taking the bus home, and the White House insisted that she did not. Seventy-three inches from her Chaco sandals to her wild hair, the prof knew that she stood out in any crowd, and when she spoke she had an accent: Haitian, with a hint of the rhythms of France. But English was her first language and she spoke it with elegance and precision. Her diction was clear, her vocabulary extensive and her enunciation always deliberate, and yet...and yet.

Whenever she talked to one of C. M. Kornbluth's Marching Morons — any one of the random, under-educated ferals who seemed to have invaded her intelligent world — the first barely articulated utterance that dribbled out in reply to any attempt at communication was always the same.

Initiating contact with an easy-to-comprehend opening question, she would address the pierced moron usually found lurking vacantly by her stop, saying something like: "Hi, do you know how long 'til the bus comes?"

Or, to the bling-bedecked moron on the table next to her in JavaStar: "Could you pass me the sugar please?" And the reply from all genders and races of moron was always based around the theme of "Wha...?"

This now formed a very basic part of the prof's diagnostic markers for determining intellectual status. If the first reply to a communication was a request to repeat the initial statement, she knew straight away that she was dealing with a moron.

Since the turn of the century the prof had been getting paid a small Washington fortune for thinking aloud. She had published a paper extrapolating from a basic concept of super-intelligence and how to deal with the first contact with super-intelligent races.

Stephen Hawking's assessment of the situation was that given our own experience with colonization, any first contact with more advanced aliens would probably be more like the movie *Independence Day* than Spielberg's *ET*. The prof agreed, which was why she sat on the bus chewing distractedly on the nail of her right thumb.



First contact, when it came, had been unmistakable. The aliens had not spoken only to a few bespectacled computer geeks parcelling out data packets to like-minded geeks. No, first contact had stopped the world and given it a good rocking. Every radio, every television, every terminal and mobile phone had received the transmission. Every screen that could show words did, and everything that could make a sound spoke:

*Tick-tock curly-wurly*

And that was it. That was the whole of the message. The transmission was non-directional, appearing to arrive from every which way simultaneously, and the best brains on Earth, as well as television presenters, were stumped as to what the words actually meant. It was clear that the message was for humanity as a whole, not just a few elite governmental high-ups, but it was equally clear that humanity as a whole had no idea what was just said.

The president's first instinct was to find a way of broadcasting a reply. The prof was the head of the appropriate think-tank, so suddenly she found herself on the great carpet of the Oval Office, explaining to the secretary of state, who in turn re-explained to the president, that a technology gap of more than about 200 years would render communication difficult — and, if these aliens were super-intelligent, impossible — unless such advanced creatures were prepared to take the time to talk to us the way we do to cats and dogs.

"Look at it this way, Mr President," she said. "First contact with an equal is in essence no different from when you see someone you like at a party. You think

that you would like to get to know them. You then have to formulate a small and pithy first-contact statement that will both pique their interest and elicit an open-ended response allowing further communication."

"So what you are saying, professor, is that this alien message is actually nothing more than a cheesy pick-up line."

The prof smiled. "Actually, sir, although the message may be seen as having an analogous purpose, it's probably

more complicated than that."

"Yes," said the president, looking at his fingers. "Almost everything seems to turn out that way."

"What do you think the message actually means?" the secretary of state asked, eyes sharp and alert. "Is it a McLuhan-esque test of reasoning where the words actually have no meaning, the mere existence of the transmission being its own message?"

The prof shrugged. "As yet I have no real idea. For example, what goes tick-tock?"

"A clock," said the president.

"A bomb," said the secretary of state.

"And our DNA is wrapped around in a double spiral, curly-wurly fashion. It could be that the message is saying something along the lines of 'shame about your genetic time-bomb', or it might be that the whole message is nothing more than someone bending over and clapping their hands together, like when you call a dog over."

"Why don't we just ask them what they meant?" said the president.

"No!" squawked the prof, a look of blind panic on her face. "Our future survival is staked on our reply. We must figure it out, whatever it takes."

She rode the bus home. The stars had tapped Earth on the shoulder. Her reflection in the window held her gaze.

"Tick-tock curly-wurly," she said. "Tick-tock curly-wurly." ■

**Gareth Owens speaks nine languages including Sumerian and Dutch, composes music that would give most people nightmares, and claims to be one of the few university-qualified wizards in the world. He is an occasional contributor of fiction to *Odyssey: Adventures in Science* magazine and has recently completed his first novel, which is full of stompy robots and exploding spaceships.**