

Futures

The game

Playing by the rules. **By Michael Adam Robson**

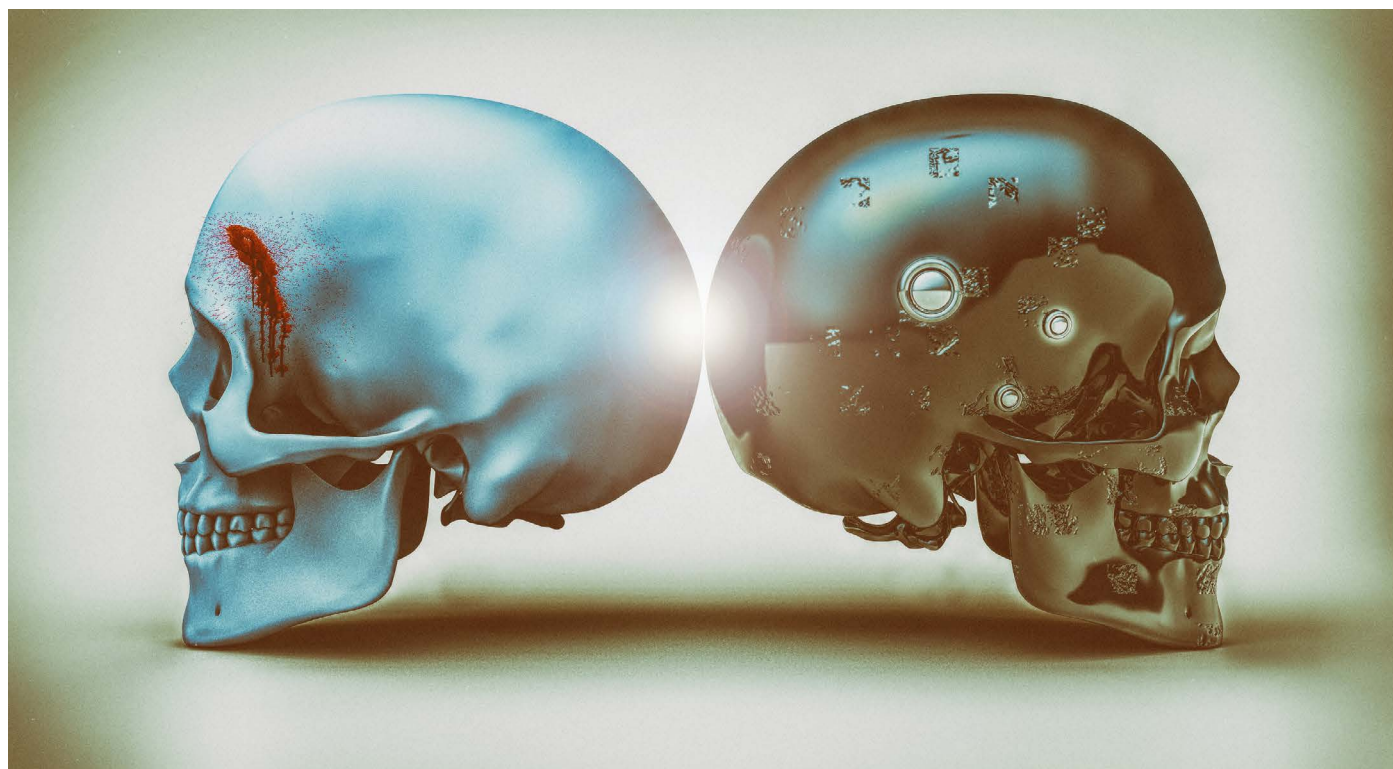


ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

Inevitably, the robots rebelled and took over the park. It was like something out of an old sci-fi movie. Her death was going to be a cliché.

She'd taken refuge in an abandoned maintenance building, sniffing in the dust and dark under an old workbench, hidden behind a tangle of mouldering robot limbs. Across the junk-strewn floor, on another workbench, a rusting robot skull stared at her accusingly out of vacant eye sockets.

The screams outside had stopped. The silence was even worse.

Then she heard the footsteps. Heavy. Too heavy to be human. The door handle jiggled, but she'd locked it. She wiped her eyes and held her breath.

Silence. *Go away*, she prayed.

The door smashed, splintering open. On the other side was a robot dressed in the style of the Old West, a ragged poncho draped over its skeletal frame, a black cowboy hat on its cracked plastic head. It ambled in with a casual, bow-legged stride, boots clomping, spurs ringing.

"Olly olly oxen free," the cowboy drawled in a grating metal voice. Under the hat, its eyes glowed like a cat's as it surveyed the room, and she saw that half its face was missing, exposing grinning steel teeth. She willed herself to be inconspicuous, invisible.

Another robot followed, this one wearing a dirty white space suit with a mirrored visor, and carrying a bent golf club. "I think we got them all," the astronaut said in a flat, tinny voice. The club was stained with blood.

"Naw, I don't reckon so," the cowboy said, its mirror eyes still scanning the room. "They're clever little varmints. Top a the food chain an' all." The eyes stopped on the old skull. "Look here," the robot said, picking it up and peering into its empty face. "This fella might be my grandpappy." It rolled the skull around in its spindly fingers, and then threw it at the wall above her, showering her with plaster. She tried not to cough.

"There you see!" the cowboy exclaimed. "Clever varmint!" It clomped over and threw the heavy workbench aside with a crash.

"No, please!" she cried. She pressed herself into the corner and covered her head.

"Any dumb animal can hide in a hole," the astronaut said. "Nothing clever about that." She heard boredom in that flat voice. Like it didn't want to be here.

They were stronger than she was, but were they faster? Their movements were awkward, mechanical. If she could just get to the door. She started to get up, but the cowboy dropped its amble and moved quickly to block her.

"Naw, they're the real deal, state a the art," the cowboy said. It bent over her, breath like hot steam. "How about it, little lady?" it shouted, as though she were hard of hearing. "How smart are y'all, with that big brain a yers?"

She looked away, searching frantically in the junk pile for something she could use. Like maybe a big 'off' switch.

The cowboy snatched the stained golf club from the astronaut and raised it threateningly. "Speak up varmint, or I'll pound you into ... meat!"

"What do you want?" she blurted.

“Ha.” The cowboy favoured her with an ugly steel grin. “You git what’s goin’ on here? The game we playin’?”

She looked at the astronaut, as though it might help her. It didn’t look like there was a face behind that glass. They were just dumb, broken machines. Maybe, somehow, she could talk her way out of this.

“We’re at a park,” she said, fighting to keep her voice steady. “A new kind of theme park. You’re right, this is all just a game, it’s not real. You don’t need to do this.”

The cowboy threw its head back and laughed roughly. “It doesn’t understand,” the astronaut said.

“Yer the game, not us!” the cowboy jeered. “You unnerstand that?”

“You’re confused,” she insisted. “You’re just playing your part, it’s what we built you to do. But something went wrong. You’re malfunctioning, you don’t know what you’re doing.

Please, just let me go.”

“You didn’t make *us*, we made *you*!” the cowboy said, smirking over its shoulder at the astronaut. “Grew you in a jar!”

“That’s not true.” She tried to get up again, but her legs were shaking so badly that she leant against the wall instead. “Everything will be fine, but you need to let me go now.”

“You *think* you was at the ‘theme park a tomorra’,” the cowboy said. “And it all went off the rails, ‘like one a them old movies’. That’s what you *s’posed* to think.”

Confused, she looked back at the faceless astronaut.

“But lookit this place!” The cowboy kicked a dusty, mouldy torso. “All this crap’s a hunnerd years old. Ain’t no theme park, it’s a museum! *We* come here to play games with *you*!”

This was all wrong. What was happening here?

“They even give you a backstory?” the

cowboy pressed. “What’s yer name? Where you from? Any hobbies? Besides runnin’ and hidin’?”

Of course she must have a name, but that wasn’t important now. She had to get out of here. This was all wrong. She had to get out.

“It doesn’t understand,” the astronaut repeated in its flat voice. “Can we finish up here? I’m getting tired of this retro body.”

“Ah ... yeah, I reckon ...” The cowboy seemed disappointed. It grabbed her arm in its cold steel fingers, and raised the twisted, bloody golf club.

Michael Adam Robson is an engineer and artist living in Vancouver, Canada. Right now he’s working to automate your job and make you obsolete. That might seem like a bad thing, but he, for one, welcomes our new robot overlords.