Al head Winston examines field

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where serious applications were to be undertaken.

Some of this involves the domain of physical robotics, that is, systems that can see and feel their environment, and do such things as disassembling small mechanical things, and working on a miniature scale. For instance, one of our recent projects involved a program which looks at integrated circuits. We think that this area will help bring about a great increase in productivity of technology in general. Practical technology is extremely important to the country because of the need to keep people out of inhuman jobs, but also because there are economic arguments that suggest that if we don’t have a strong productivity technology, we won’t be able to compete with other countries, such as Japan, that do.

One thing that has turned us on in the last year is the notion of creating a computer-based principle system – a combination of secretary, pedagogue, information retriever, library, no-oversight scheduler. The notion is of providing each person with a set of intellectual tools comparable with technological tools such as the pocket calculator, but with powers multiplied by 100.

As for biomedical applications, in the area of diagnostics, for example, computers have become increasingly good at understanding symptoms, prescribing drugs, examining electrocardiograms, and a variety of other medical functions.

The Tech: What advantages does the student population gain from AI at MIT?

Winston: I think we suffer to some extent from overpopularity. We tend to be a science for which there is a great deal of immediate attraction. It is a universal phenomenon in which people are quickly interested. We do the best we can, and hope that programs will be made available for more students.

Of course there is always a need for increased funding. We are on the verge of a hardware revolution as well as an AI revolution in which inexpensive computation will become available to everyone. That is the solution to the involvement of undergraduates in this area.

The Tech: How do you feel about the world’s need for AI?

Winston: I personally find AI to be an endlessly fascinating field to be involved in, partly because of its potential for applications and partly because of the philosophical implications of eventual success in producing really smart machines. I think that AI is something that will have a pervasive effect on society and social system. It’s something that people must know about and have opinions on if we are to make informed choices for the future.

The Tech: Are you certain of the eventual success of AI?

Winston: Well, certainly one must have faith in one’s work and if we can go on our track record, we can look confidently toward the future. If one looks at the learning curve of AI over its twenty years, the achievements have been truly outstanding. Certainly fifteen years ago no one conceived that computers could be made to have a simple dialogue with each other, or could be taught to play games.

There are still a great many mysteries to be unravelled, so we have a guarantee that this project will be important and relevant for many years to come.

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