

Wake in Fright*

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Gordon Woolf is inclined to start a campaign for the return of the rocker switch

I woke. The red digital display by the bedside was flashing, but, more disturbing, music was coming from the other end of the house.

I made my way carefully, and turned off the CD player. No one had entered the house.

Next time we returned from a weekend away, to music as we unlocked the front door. I worked out that the CD player, although switched off, would start playing if the mains power was turned off and then on again, as in a power cut. I now unplug it when it is not in use.

Much more recently, I picked up the phone and heard the chatter of a modem connection. But the task bar of my computer was not showing an active connection, so I could not right-click with the mouse and close the connection. I instinctively reached for the black rocker switch at the back of the computer -- and it wasn't there!

In this case hitting the blue button on the front was enough -- everything died, and when it restarted it did not try again to make a connection. I've been too scared to check with Telstra whether it was dialling the local Internet number or a number of its own. I'll find out when the bill comes.

But my new computer, bought this year, is not alone in its lack of a physical on-off switch. It has a button which seems to switch the power off, but it can still be switched on by many means if the settings within the machine allow it. It can be woken by a time signal, or by the phone ringing through an external or internal modem -- or... In other words, off is not really off.

The industry is quite open about it. For example, the Windows XP Help file states: "ACPI (Advanced Configuration and Power Interface) is the foundation for the OnNow industry initiative that allows system manufacturers to deliver computers that start at the touch of a key on a keyboard."

In this instance, the call to make a modem connection seems to have come from a remnant of a program I had tried out earlier that day -- a backup program which was on a magazine CD and which appeared to be free, but which immediately wanted to make an Internet connection to its home base. I was not connected at the time, but it kept bringing up a dialog to connect, and I kept clicking Cancel, or Work Offline, or hitting the close box cross in the top right.

It was not discouraged, but I was ... discouraged from using the program at all. I went to the Control Panel and through the formalities of the "Add or Remove Programs" dialog, but fatally did not restart the computer. What was left was the rump of a program which remained to try to make the Internet connection for a not non-existent program.

Like an alien robotic lifeform in some Isaac Asimov science fiction tale, it would continue trying until eventually killed. But in this case it was not controlled by Asimov's three laws of robot behaviour.

Alongside are some other hints on things to check to make sure that your computer does not awake to do things which might frighten you.

Enquiries showed that while a simple 4-socket power strip can be bought for around \$4, a powerboard with individual switches can cost almost 20 times that amount -- almost as much as some of the devices I would plug into it.

Generally, faced with a suggestion that some dramatic change for the worse in our lifestyle might be due to some major conspiracy or due to incompetence, I'll opt for the latter. But in the meantime, will anyone join me in lobbying for Government legislation to insist on the installation of on/off rocker switches? We might see if it would be any good to start a National Organisation to Guarantee On/Off Devices...

*The title is used with acknowledgements to Kenneth Cook, whose tale of a schoolteacher who disintegrate mentally when stranded in the Outback was turned in 1971 into a joint US-Australian movie starring Chips Rafferty and Jack Thompson. The movie was relabelled as "The Outback" for some markets and shortened for TV but was, according to US reviewer Leonard Maltin "still unlikely to be endorsed by the Australian tourist commission".

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Captions:

The checkbox in the modem configuration dialogs which controls whether your modem can wake your computer.

Choices in the power options let you decide whether the button you think of as an on/off switch is really going to be allowed to switch off your computer.

Breakout:

On regaining control...

To make sure your computer is not waking to perform a scheduled task: Click Start, click All Programs, point to Accessories, point to System Tools, and then click Scheduled Tasks. Right-click each task, and then click Properties. Deselect the Wake the computer to run this task check box.

By default, power management is set to not starting scheduled tasks if the computer is running on battery power.

Power Options in Control Panel: You can use these to reduce power consumption and there are a mass of settings. For example, it can be used to turn off your monitor and hard disks automatically to save power or to put the computer on standby when it is idle. When you want to use the computer again, it comes out of standby quickly, and your desktop is restored exactly as you left it. Standby is useful for conserving battery power in portable computers, but because it does not save your desktop state to disk, so a power failure while on Standby can cause you to lose unsaved information.

You can also put your computer in "hibernation". This saves everything in memory on disk, turns off your monitor and hard disk, and then turns off your computer. When you restart, your desktop is restored exactly as you left it. It takes longer to bring your computer out of hibernation than out of standby.

The Windows Help files suggest: "Put your computer in hibernation when you will be away from the computer for an extended time or overnight."

The Windows help file states: "Advanced Configuration and Power Interface (ACPI) is an open industry specification that defines a flexible and extensible hardware interface for the system board. Software designers use this specification to integrate power management features throughout a computer system, including hardware, the operating system, and application software. This integration enables Windows to determine which applications are active and handle all of the power management resources for computer subsystems and peripherals."

Perhaps another breakout:

The three laws of robot behaviour:

Law One: A robot may not injure a human being, or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm, unless this would violate a higher order law.

Law Two: A robot must obey orders given it by human beings, except where such orders would conflict with a higher order law.

Law Three: A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with a higher order law.

They were created by Isaac Asimov or John W. Campbell (each attributed them to the other).

They first appeared explicitly in "Runaround", by Asimov, published in the March 1942 issue of "Astounding Science Fiction".

The, fourth, or "Zeroth Law" added later, to be listed before the other three, is "A robot may not injure humanity, or, through inaction, allow humanity to come to harm."

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