

[<< Back to Article](#)

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Q&A: Author Nicholas Carr on the Terrifying Future of Computing

By Spencer Reiss 12.20.07



Photo: William Taylor

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Nicholas Carr is high tech's Captain Buzzkill — the go-to guy for bad news. A former executive editor of *Harvard Business Review*, he tossed a grenade under big-budget corporate computing with his 2004 polemic *Does IT Matter?* (Answer: Not really, because all companies have it in spades.) Carr's new book, *The Big Switch*, targets the emerging "World Wide Computer" — dummy PCs tied to massive server farms way up in the data cloud. We asked Carr why he finds the future of computing so scary.

Wired: IBM founder Thomas J. Watson is quoted — possibly misquoted — as saying the world needs only five computers. Is it true?

Carr: The World Wide Web is becoming one vast, programmable machine. As NYU's Clay Shirky likes to say, Watson was off by four.

Wired: When does the big switch from the desktop to the data cloud happen?

Carr: Most people are already there. Young people in particular spend way more time using so-called cloud apps — MySpace, Flickr, Gmail — than running old-fashioned programs on their hard drives. What's amazing is that this shift from private to public software has happened without us even noticing it.

Wired: What happened to privacy worries?

Carr: People say they're nervous about storing personal info online, but they do it all the time, sacrificing privacy to save time and money. Companies are no different. The two most popular Web-based business applications right now are for managing payroll and customer accounts — some of the most sensitive information companies have.

Wired: What's left for PCs?

Carr: They're turning into network terminals.

Wired: Just like Sun Microsystems' old mantra, "The network is the computer"?

Carr: It's no coincidence that Google CEO Eric Schmidt cut his teeth there. Google is fulfilling the destiny that Sun sketched out.

Wired: But a single global system?

Carr: I used to think we'd end up with something dynamic and heterogeneous — many companies loosely joined. But we're already seeing a great deal of consolidation by companies like Google and Microsoft. We'll probably see some kind of oligopoly, with standards that allow the movement of data among the utilities similar to the way current moves through the electric grid.

Wired: What happened to the Web undermining institutions and empowering individuals?

Carr: Computers are technologies of liberation, but they're also technologies of control. It's great that everyone is empowered to write blogs, upload videos to YouTube, and promote themselves on Facebook. But as systems become more centralized — as personal data becomes more exposed and data-mining software grows in sophistication — the interests of control will gain the upper hand. If you're looking to monitor and manipulate people, you couldn't design a better machine.

Wired: So it's Google über alles?

Carr: Yeah. Welcome to Google Earth. A bunch of bright computer scientists and AI experts in Silicon Valley are not only rewiring our computers — they're dictating the future terms of our culture. It's terrifying.

Wired: Back to the future — HAL lives!

Carr: The scariest thing about Stanley Kubrick's vision wasn't that computers started to act like people but that people had started to act like computers. We're beginning to process information as if we're nodes; it's all about the speed of locating and reading data. We're transferring our intelligence into the machine, and the machine is transferring its way of thinking into us.