



ALONE TOGETHER

WHY WE EXPECT MORE FROM **TECHNOLOGY** AND LESS FROM EACH OTHER

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From the introduction to *Alone Together*



Computers no longer wait for humans to project meaning onto them. Now, sociable robots meet our gaze, speak to us, and learn to recognize us. They ask us to take care of them; in response, we imagine that they might care for us in return. Indeed, among the most talked about robotic designs are in the area of care and companionship. In summer 2010, there are enthusiastic reports in the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* on robotic teachers, companions, and therapists. And Microsoft demonstrates a virtual human, Milo, that recognizes the people it interacts with and whose personality is sculpted by them. Tellingly, in the video that introduces Milo to the public, a young man begins by playing games with Milo in a virtual garden; by the end of the demonstration, things have heated up—he confides in Milo after being told off by his parents.

We are challenged to ask what such things augur. Some people are looking for robots to clean rugs and help with the laundry. Others hope for a mechanical bride. As sociable robots propose themselves as substitutes for people, new networked devices offer us machine-mediated relationships with each other, another kind of substitution. We romance the robot and become inseparable from our smart phones. As this happens, we remake ourselves and our relationships with each other through our new intimacy with machines. People talk about Web access on their BlackBerries as “the place for hope” in life, the place where loneliness can be defeated. A woman in her late sixties describes her new iPhone: “It’s like having a little Times Square in my pocketbook. All lights. All the people I could meet.” People are lonely. The network is seductive. But if we are always on, we may deny ourselves the rewards of solitude.

As I listen for what stands behind this moment, I hear a certain fatigue with the difficulties of life with people. We insert robots into every narrative of human frailty. People make too many demands; robot demands would be of a more manageable sort. People disappoint; robots will not. When people talk about relationships with robots, they talk about cheating husbands, wives who fake orgasms, and children who take drugs. They talk about how hard it is to understand family and friends. I am at first surprised by these comments. Their clear intent is to bring people down a notch. A forty-four-year-old woman says, “After all, we never know how another person really feels. People put on a good face. Robots would be safer.” A thirty-year-old man remarks, “I’d rather talk to a robot. Friends can be exhausting. The robot will always be there for me. And whenever I’m done, I can walk away.”

The idea of sociable robots suggests that we might navigate intimacy by skirting it. People seem comforted by the belief that if we alienate or fail each other, robots will be there, programmed to provide simulations of love. Our population is aging; there will be robots to take care of us. Our children are neglected; robots will tend to them. We are too exhausted to deal with each other in adversity; robots will have the energy. Robots won’t be judgmental. We will be accommodated. An older woman says of her robot dog, “It is better than a real dog. . . . It won’t do dangerous things, and it won’t betray you. . . . Also, it won’t die suddenly and abandon you and make you very sad.”

The elderly are the first to have companionate robots aggressively marketed to them, but young people also see the merits of robotic companionship. These days, teenagers have sexual adulthood thrust upon them before they are ready to deal with the complexities of relationships. They are drawn to the comfort of connection without the demands of intimacy. This may lead them to a hookup—sex without commitment or even caring. Or it may lead to an online romance—companionship that can always be interrupted. Not surprisingly, teenagers are drawn to love stories in which full intimacy cannot occur—here I think of current passions for films and novels about high school vampires who cannot sexually consummate relationships for fear of hurting those they love. And teenagers are drawn to the idea of technological communion. They talk easily of robots that would be safe and predictable companions.

These young people have grown up with sociable robot pets, the companions of their playrooms, which portrayed emotion, said they cared, and asked to be cared for. We are psychologically programmed not only to nurture what we love but to love what we nurture. So even simple artificial creatures can provoke heartfelt attachment. Many teenagers anticipate that the robot toys of their childhood will give way to full-fledged machine companions. In the psychoanalytic tradition, a symptom addresses a conflict but distracts us from understanding or resolving it; a dream expresses a wish. Sociable robots serve as both symptom and dream: as a symptom, they promise a way to sidestep conflicts about intimacy; as a dream, they express a wish for relationships with limits, a way to be both together and alone.

Some people even talk about robots as providing respite from feeling overwhelmed by technology. In Japan,

companionate robots are specifically marketed as a way to seduce people out of cyberspace; robots plant a new flag in the physical real. If the problem is that too much technology has made us busy and anxious, the solution will be another technology that will organize, amuse, and relax us. So, although historically robots provoked anxieties about technology out of control, these days they are more likely to represent the reassuring idea that in a world of problems, science will offer solutions. Robots have become a twenty-first-century *deus ex machina*. Putting hope in robots expresses an enduring technological optimism, a belief that as other things go wrong, science will go right. In a complicated world, robots seem a simple salvation. It is like calling in the cavalry.

But this is not a book about robots. Rather, it is about how we are changed as technology offers us substitutes for connecting with each other face-to-face. We are offered robots and a whole world of machine-mediated relationships on networked devices. As we instant-message, e-mail, text, and Twitter, technology redraws the boundaries between intimacy and solitude. We talk of getting “rid” of our e-mails, as though these notes are so much excess baggage. Teenagers avoid making telephone calls, fearful that they “reveal too much.” They would rather text than talk. Adults, too, choose keyboards over the human voice. It is more efficient, they say. Things that happen in “real time” take too much time. Tethered to technology, we are shaken when that world “unplugged” does not signify, does not satisfy. After an evening of avatar-to-avatar talk in a networked game, we feel, at one moment, in possession of a full social life and, in the next, curiously isolated, in tenuous complicity with strangers. We build a following on Facebook or MySpace and wonder to what degree our followers are friends. We recreate ourselves as online personae and give ourselves new bodies, homes, jobs, and romances. Yet, suddenly, in the half-light of virtual community, we may feel utterly alone. As we distribute ourselves, we may abandon ourselves. Sometimes people experience no sense of having communicated after hours of connection. And they report feelings of closeness when they are paying little attention. In all of this, there is a nagging question: Does virtual intimacy degrade our experience of the other kind and, indeed, of all encounters, of any kind?

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