Human-Robot Relations: Why We Should Worry

BOSTON — It's time humans reexamined our relationships with machines and alter course before it's too late, a prominent scientist said here Friday (Feb. 15) at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

People are looking more and more to robotic toys and tools for companionship, and less to other people, said Sherry Turkle, a professor of the social studies of science and technology at MIT. Innovations such as Siri, Apple's iPhone digital assistant, have trained people to rely on machines in new ways, Turkle said, and to envision a future where robots are advanced enough to serve as teachers for the young, and caretakers for the old.

"The idea of some kind of artificial companionship has already become the new normal," Turkle said. "Kids play with robotic pets, become allies with computer game agents. But I think that this new normal comes with a price. For the idea of artificial companionship to become our new normal, we have to change ourselves, and in the process we are remaking human values and human connection."

Robot Surgery Problems

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Robot seals and caretakers

Turkle studies people's thoughts and feelings about robots, and has found a culture shift over time. Where subject:
in her studies used to say, in the 1980s and '90s, that love and friendship are connections that can occur only between humans, people now often say robots could fill these roles.

For example, Turkle has studied Paro, a robotic baby seal that's been used as a companion for older adults with dementia or depression. It was widely seen as a great advance, Turkle said, when one grief-stricken woman was able to talk to Paro and be comforted by it.

Many experts say in the future, robots could be better caretakers for the elderly, because they could be programmed with endless patience, and would never be abusive, inept or dishonest.

But Turkle worries about this drive to replace human caretakers with robots. [5 Reasons to Fear Robots]

"It's not just that older people are supposed to be talking. Younger people are supposed to be listening," she said. "We are showing very little interest in what our elders have to say. We are building the machines that will literally let their stories fall on deaf ears."

**Childhood friends**

Children, in turn, play with more and more robotic and electronic toys. Many, like the Tamagotchi digital pets of the 1990s, and the later robotic dog Aibo, require nurturing, which encourages kids to take care of them, and therefore, to care about them. Some kids say they prefer these pets to real dogs and cats that can grow old and die.

"People used to buy pets to teach their children about life and death and loss," Turkle said. We are now teaching kids that real living creatures are risky, while robots are safe.

Tukle interviewed a teenage boy in 1983, asking him whom he would turn to, to talk about dating problems. The boy said he would talk to his dad, but wouldn't consider talking to a robot, because machines could never truly...
understand human relationships.

In 2008, Turkle interviewed another boy of the same age, from the same neighborhood as the first. This time, the boy said he would prefer to talk to a robot, which could be programmed with a large database of knowledge about relationship patterns, rather than talk to his dad, who might give bad advice.

"In 25 years, human fallibility has gone from being an endearment and a tie that binds, to being an unnecessary liability," Turkle said. "For me the most important job of childhood and adolescence is to learn attachment and trust in other people. We are forgetting crucial things about the care and conversation that can only occur between humans." [5 Ways to Foster Self-Compassion in Your Child]

The robotic moment

In her interviews with people of many ages and backgrounds, Turkle has found that many now are coming to fantasize about robots that could serve as friends who would always listen to us, who would never become angry, who would never disappoint.

"What are we talking about when we're talking about robots? We're talking about our fears of each other," she said. "Our disappointments with each other. Our lack of community. Our lack of time."

Though robots aren't yet advanced enough to provide the perfect illusion of companionship, that day is not far off.

"We are now at what I call the robotic moment," Turkle said. "Not because we have built robots worthy of our company but because we are ready for theirs."

Now is the time, she said, to step back and reconsider how and when we want to let machines into our lives, and when we should turn them off.

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More from LiveScience
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Clara has a bachelor's degree in astronomy and physics from Wesleyan University, and a graduate certificate in science writing from the University of California, Santa Cruz. She has written for both Space.com and Live Science.

Clara Moskowitz on

20 comments

Add a comment

Randall Laraway · Top Commenter · Volunteer at Louis Stokes VA Medical Ctr.

Sounds cute, BUT, do you want your children growing up learning how to interact with other children OR a man-made computerized machine? Let's not go overboard on this computer-generated friendship gig. It lacks interpersonal relationships very much needed in our human society.

Reply · Like · February 21, 2013 at 5:39pm

Jonathan Limebrook · Top Commenter · Gonzaga University

I think Professor Turkle is dead wrong. Many of the aspects of interpersonal relationships have negative consequences. "Do what I say" is a popular refrain, and it leads to such diverse negative consequences as divorce and slavery. We can indulge our dictatorial urges without consequence when those commanded have no egos, do what we say happily, and can be turned off with a switch. I think the proof of this is that today's kids seem to get along with each other and with other age groups much better than any previous generation.

Reply · Like · February 20, 2013 at 1:23pm

Душан Радин · Top Commenter · Viša jebačka

Maybe wecan develope our own Geth's?

Reply · Like · February 20, 2013 at 4:26am

Don Gilbert · Top Commenter · Great Lakes Bible College

Robotic brothels are probably less than a decade away. So many people would take a stunningly attractive electronic partner over a decent but unspectacular human one that it could conceivably become a real threat to our social order.

Reply · Like · February 20, 2013 at 3:04am

David H Dennis · Top Commenter · Photographer at Photographer

Andy, I'm afraid you are wrong. Have you listened to men talk about women, and women talk about men? The sexes really seem to hate each other nowadays. So why not a robot?

Reply · Like · February 20, 2013 at 8:13am

Robert Houghton · Top Commenter · San Diego, California

Hey, when I get my Marilyn Monrobot, I'll never make the singles scene again.

Reply · Like · February 20, 2013 at 10:49am

An Dingle

"endless patience, and would never be abusive, inept or dishonest."

"Sounds great! I suppose that this isn't attainable from a human, so it is used to describe a robot. Hmmm. I think I'd rather date a robot, should that be true.

"We are now teaching kids that real living creatures are risky, while robots are safe."

We are now teaching kids that real living creatures are risky, while robots are safe.
-- Um, I'm not a kid, and I have already realized this.

Cheryl Meade · Owner/Seamstress at Queen Renaissance Creations by Cheryl
I read this, and I think that because the human race is over worked, under appreciated, restricted in every aspect of living including time in general, the robot will be a saving grace to us all because we didn't leave room for being human in the first place.

An Dingle
yup!

Peter Sillavan · Top Commenter · University of Montevallo
One more thing I got from this, is anyone ready for the terminator? lol

Peter Sillavan · Top Commenter · University of Montevallo
Well she definitely has a point! Then again she's never had to live in a nursing home!

Derek Mathias · Top Commenter
So the author is advocating settling for disappointment? That sounds awfully depressing.

It won't be long (likely within a decade or two) before robots improve to the point that we can't distinguish them from human companions. They'll pass the look, sound, feel, behavior and Turing tests. In theory, we'll be able to program them to be the perfect companions. After all, how could a real human compete with someone specifically designed to challenge us where we want and need it, agree with and comfort us where we want and need it, and change (both physically and mentally) when we so desire it. This will likely be true for robot friends, and doubly so for robot lovers.

I made a YouTube video that discusses these advancements (it's in the context of the difficulties such technologies will pose for religion, but it illustrates the point well):
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tBKYVwQi3RQ

Raven Bo · Top Commenter
I think vibrating dildo is acceptable norm for women now days. With such "liberation", less tolerance for men.

Gary Coffman · Top Commenter
Machines reflect the personalities of the people who program them. Some are likeable, others are not.
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