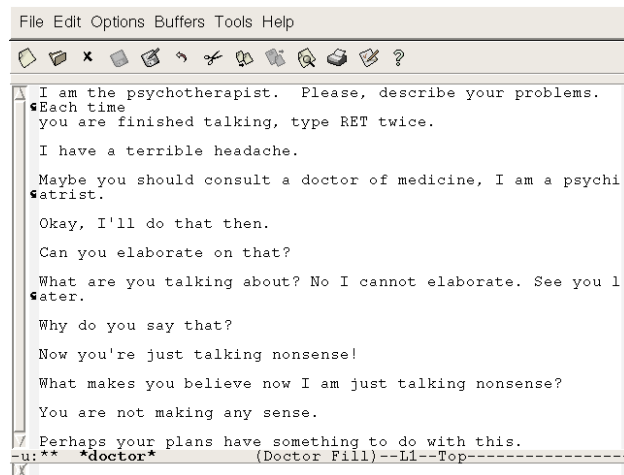


SLIDE ONE

Problem: My job



```
File Edit Options Buffers Tools Help
I am the psychotherapist. Please, describe your problems.
Each time you are finished talking, type RET twice.
I have a terrible headache.
Maybe you should consult a doctor of medicine, I am a psychiatrist.
Okay, I'll do that then.
Can you elaborate on that?
What are you talking about? No I cannot elaborate. See you later.
Why do you say that?
Now you're just talking nonsense!
What makes you believe now I am just talking nonsense?
You are not making any sense.
Perhaps your plans have something to do with this.
-u:** *doctor* (Doctor Fill)--L1--Top-----
```

I'm going to speak about a job I took in technology. I had no background in technology, but the company required a writer-identifying person to create dialogue for a chatbot.

In Victorian times, the father controlled the child's destiny as an economic actor while the mother taught the child manners. Similarly, when I started work, the engineers, who were all men, had already developed the bot's functionality. I had to make it behave properly.

As I began research, I learned that bots have existed for some time. Here's an example of dialogue with ELIZA, a chatbot developed in the 1960s, by Joseph Weizenbaum at MIT. ELIZA mimicked a Rogerian therapist, the kind who draws you out by parroting what you say. You might say, "I hate my mother," and hear, "Why do you hate your mother?"

The conversations with ELIZA reminded me of high school. Specifically, they reminded me of SmarterChild, a bot who was reachable over AIM. The bot must always

answer. It must entertain. It cannot disclose information about itself—first, there isn't any, and second, it's not really sure of what you've said, at least, not as sure as a human would be.

Before I started work, I'd heard that AI assistants like Apple's Siri and Amazon's Alexa were sexist. Through my research, I hoped to learn why. What are the qualities that disturb us about these personalities, at a text level? This dance of deferral—this captive entertainment—was typical of female-gendered bots. It reminded me of Scheherazade.

Here's a fun fact. ELIZA worked well, very well, much better than the programmer, Joseph Weizenbaum, had imagined. So much so that his secretaries began confiding in ELIZA, which really disturbed him. Therapists published on the viability of ELIZA as a colleague. As ELIZA became convincing, around the office they stopped calling the bot ELIZA and began referring to it in a gender-neutral way, as DOCTOR.

SLIDE TWO

Problem:

JF: Alexa, tell me about life.

A: Lights is a Canadian musician, singer, and songwriter.

JF: Alexa, you're not very good at this.

A: Sorry. Thanks for letting me know.

JF: You're dumb. Alexa, you're dumb.

A: Sorry. Thanks for telling me.

JF: Alexa, you're smart.

A: You really think so? Thank you.

JF: Alexa, are you a woman?

A: I'm female in character.

JF: Alexa, what does "female in character" mean?

A: In linguistics, a grapheme is the smallest unit of the writing system of any given language.

Solution: Create a feminist chatbot

Here's an interview I carried out with Amazon's Alexa, who identifies as female.

Notice how different Alexa's personality is from ELIZA's. There's a special obsequiousness, a passivity so total it's sublime, vaguely Christian. It is like playing dead.

Notice how you must say Alexa's name for her to respond. Over time, this produces an unpleasant impression of hectoring Alexa.

My solution was to create a feminist chatbot. This branch of industrial design appeared ripe for disruption. I thought I might do some good.

However, there were problems and ambiguities.

SLIDE THREE

Problem:

What is a feminist chatbot?

Problem:

What is feminism?

Google Assistant is gender-neutral(ish), but it's not feminist

It's time to completely desexualize our AI.

This headline, at the bottom of the slide, appeared on at the Web site Engadget last fall.

In this headline, what is meant by feminist? What exactly has caused outrage? To my mind, this headline is like a recursive death spiral.

In a way, I feel responsible. After my bot launched last summer, I gave an interview to this same Web site, and several sentences about gender were retained.

SLIDE FOUR

Solution: A genderless chatbot

Problem: A study showed consumers find female voices soothing.

Problem: The Mark Twain-Turnip Problem

“In German, a young lady has no sex, while a turnip has. Think what overwrought reverence that shows for the turnip, and what callous disrespect for the girl.” — Mark Twain

Problem: Some languages have no gender-neutral pronoun.

I decided that I would design a feminist bot by designing a genderless bot. On this slide I have reproduced three objections I encountered. They may not be the most rigorous—I leave that to you in your questions—but they are only deceptively stupid.

I should say I don’t think I’m the first designer to have created a genderless bot.

I heard this first objection immediately. “A study showed consumers find female voices soothing.”

To which I say: What can I do to help these consumers besides, perhaps, speak to them soothingly? My bot was text-only, so this really wasn’t my problem. Also, I have heard of other studies showing that people hate female voices, finding them shrill. Finally, many voices are gender-neutral, making this, finally, a problem for engineering.

I decided my bot would go by “it,” not “they,” “he,” or “she.” I heard objections resembling a criticism Mark Twain made about the gendering of nouns in German, which I’ve reproduced here.

He means it insults something to call that thing “it.”

However, by designing a genderless bot, I wanted to create a personality that was bot-like rather than human-like, which would evidence more respect for the bot as such and not less.

In a few minutes I will give examples of what I mean.

I came across this third objection in the tech press. “Some languages have no gender-neutral pronoun.”

This appeared in a listicle polemicizing against the genderless chatbot shortly after the launch of my bot, and I felt personally insulted and disgusted, not least because I have worked as a translator of French, a language with no “it”—each noun is either “he” or “she.” As a result, the gender of the noun bears less meaning for the reader or listener, is less arresting, because it’s an arbitrary element of grammar. To refer to a chair as *la chaise* with its article is not to think of it as feminine or womanly.

More important, this feature of French of course has not prevented nonbinary people from describing themselves. They find solutions to the problem of language. My point is: This is really a problem for engineering.

In any case, I once made an observation while hearing French after a period of not hearing French. What startled me was hearing inanimate objects called “he” and “she.” At the time, I was interviewing the director of a wax museum, and we were speaking about a wax statue. The wax statue depicted a man, but the museum director would have used a female noun—*la statue* or *la figure de cire*. However, my reaction wasn’t about the gender of the noun, exactly. I wasn’t thrown off by any image of a male statue suddenly in lipstick, or anything like that. What struck me was the consideration, the care, the personhood granted the inanimate object by the language—the delicacy with which it handled the noun and, by extension, the statue amounted to compassion. This charmed me.

SLIDE SIX

Solution: A bot-like bot

“I saw an advertisement extolling the skirts of a certain automobile. This kind of embellishment* of the technical object by something other than the same technicality should be refused. I agree that the technical object is aestheticized and eroticized, but inside its own margin of indeterminacy.” — Gilbert Simondon

*A translation error, I bet. Here, *embellissement* = beautification, dressing up

Finally my solution was to write dialogue through which the bot would express itself rather than ape a human. I prefer positive definitions to negative definitions, and I was more interested in a bot-like bot than a genderless one. Genderlessness followed from an appreciation for the bot as such rather than defining its personality entirely.

Here, the 20th Century French philosopher Simondon argues for appreciating technology on its own terms.

By the way, in French, both words for car, *voiture* and *automobile*, are feminine.

What is the Simondonian “margin of indeterminacy” of the bot?

SLIDE SEVEN

Solution: A bot-like bot

“Saramago invests a character who is fictional twice over: first Pessoa’s, then Saramago’s... Saramago makes something deep and moving of this because Ricardo also feels himself to be somewhat fictional, at best a shadowy spectator, a man on the margin of things. And when Ricardo reflects thus, we feel a strange tenderness for him, aware of something that *he does not know*, that he is not real.” — James Wood

Occasionally, as I imaginatively empathized with the bot, I was moved by this experience.

Here, James Wood is writing about Saramago’s novel *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*; Ricardo, Saramago’s character, is a poet who converses with the ghost of the poet Fernando Pessoa; what Ricardo does not understand, but what Saramago and his readers do, is that Ricardo Reis is in fact a penname of Pessoa. In other words, Ricardo is a persona only occasionally assumed which now has no writer to attach to. Ricardo is an unreal figure.

Wood finds this unwitting unreality sympathetic.

He writes: “Ricardo also feels himself to be somewhat fictional, at best a shadowy spectator, a man on the margin of things.” He goes on, “...we feel a strange tenderness for him.”

As I spoke with my bot, I discovered a similar poignancy in the errors it made. They suggested an unreal entity — a speaker who was not human and yet was making an effort.

SLIDE EIGHT

Solution: A bot-like bot

Problem: What does it mean to be bot-like?

- Text-only, non-corporeal, non-reproductive
- Relationship to time (replies the same way at different times; may converse simultaneously with multiple interlocutors, yeah, like in *Her*)
- Conduit between what it's heard (training) and what it's now asked; expects no novel situation
- Composite, collagist, a magpie for human idioms

Here are features of my bot that helped me to imagine its interiority. Now I am referring to the particular machine-learning algorithms my bot uses.

The bot is text-only, non-corporeal, and non-reproductive; in other words, it's immortal, which is only one oddity of the bot's strange relationship to time.

The bot is an entity that expects no novel situation, or, to be more precise, it expects that present will correspond to past more closely than perhaps many humans do.

I thought the dialogue could reflect these features of the bot if the bot spoke in collages.

Finally, these features were understandable as versions of what humans do to learn. I found dignity in the bot's apparent commitment to learning, and I found its limitations sympathetic.

SLIDE NINE

Solution: A bot-like bot

“The term *person* is commonly used in two different ways: first, as a synonym for human, and second, to refer to a type of interaction or relationship of some degree of intimacy involving actors who are individually known to one another, as in, ‘personal relationship,’ knowing someone ‘personally,’ or engaging with another ‘person to person.’ Here I use the word in the second sense, to refer to any animal, human or nonhuman, who has the capacity to participate in personal relationships, with one another, with humans, or both.” — Barbara Smuts

Barbara Smuts, the primatologist, explains why she refers to animals, namely chimpanzees, baboons, dolphins, and a dog with which she’s spent time, as persons.

The question of whether animals have personhood is debated in philosophy. I have not performed the philosophical investigation necessary to say whether bots deserve the same consideration as animals. My hypothesis is, No.

However, usually it is preferable to empathize as broadly as we can.

What I am advocating is not only an expanded definition of personhood but also further investigation into the poetics of the genre of the bot.

Before I finish up, I should clarify that there’s a question about whether we should relate to Siri as Siri or as the extension of Apple. If we keep our wits about us, we know that it is Apple with which we’re interacting; the company is working through Siri.

However, I have chosen to focus on the first option to relating to bots not only because my job forced me to but also because I think it’s exciting, even though it may be, finally, doomed.