

Post

M2M General



Monsters: Machine to Machine and Machine to Human

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Not the hairy monster hiding under your bed, but the Leviathans that roam your future. Big ideas. Future echoes that foreshadow the oncoming waves of technological advance. Cultural agents that shape and define, and in turn are shaped and defined by, the daily buzz of techno culture.

“Monsters” in this context are meant to represent the defining keystones that are already framing our discourse around the future and will do so more in the coming years. These monsters needn’t be in the foreground of everyday design practice, but they will lurch in the background both as overarching principles and unresolved matters in our mid-term relationship with ourselves.

Our compendium ranges from Killer Robots and Ghosts in the Machine to Playful Demons. In this first article we look at those metallic menaces that will one day turn us into smouldering piles of ashes.

Part 1: Killer Robots

Both the physical variety that Karel Čapek christened almost 100 years ago, and the new breed of software agents that are now ubiquitous on our digital public squares. We are now positively co-existing with entities to which we tend to assign qualities of agency and sentience.

We mediate relationships between these entities acting as fleshy connectors between disparate inorganic systems. Our wetware is limited though by the number of synapses and the speed at which our chemical messengers can carry information.



Robots can of course process data and work quicker but we interpret their actions and assign meaning and intention where there is none. Whether or not this will ever change is a fundamental question at the heart of artificial intelligence and M2M. AI has been described as something that is always 20 years away. True AI in the sense of machines that can think about the world around them is going to remain tantalisingly out of reach for decades and centuries to come.

The illusion though is compelling and is enough to keep us entranced denizens in the new ecosystem. From the manufacturing robot in a Chinese factory that replaces a human employee, to the witty Twitter bot that teases us with Wilderesque ripostes, or a Siri-like virtual personal assistant, these are performative actors that intend and do. The foreseeable future is one in which we, humans, learn to relate and interact with the complex ecosystems borne by these new creatures.

A subtle but firm integration process has been going on for quite some time, and now we are coexisting with a new race of agents, both physical and virtual. These “unbundled AIs”, not monolithic human-like intelligences, but more like brisk, serviceable demon spirits, are scattered among a myriad of different contexts of our lives. Robots, either the big chunky lump of metal or the invisible “[Ghost in the Shell](#)” kind, take precedence in industrial processes and in daily life, from factory floor to a healthy block of Twitter users or a majority of the Wikipedia editor staff.

Robots are better adapted for the new information topologies, running with alacrity among information streams and massive data sets. As the embodiment of discrete sets of computational rules dressed up in humanly understandable communicational interfaces, robots are just PR for algorithms. Service touchpoints evolve into service avatars, apps into Appavatars that try and create inner models of our needs and expectations and strive to a better understanding of us and our world.

Robots also finding a function as messengers between worlds, extending the concept of remote presence into the “real world”, a physical expression of a digital motion.

As the integration process goes on, we struggle to find new policies, ethics and rules of coexistence. In this view, designers act as ambassadors for the robots, with the power and mission of making proposals, granting concessions and finding a balance between helpfulness and creepiness, between predicting intentions and being obnoxious.

Finally, there’s a dire need to be on the watch out for the most acute conflicts that the new landscape can bring. The interactions between robots and humans, and their occasionally differing agendas and frames of reference, can end up in all kinds of serious mix-ups such as stock market crashes or illegitimate content takedowns by copyright reasons, when a bot enforcer goes rogue.

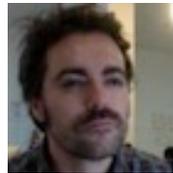


As the “robot population” of the world increases, there’s a need to go beyond the idea of dealing with these agents on an individual basis, and start thinking about the implications of the existence of entire software ecosystems in which their internal dynamics are at least as significant as their relationships with their humans creators and co-inhabitants. Alliances, synergies, conflict and clashes emerge as robots, and the rules systems they are the incarnations of, try to operate in the same notional spaces, sometimes with amusing results, such the seemingly mundane books that end up with a listed price of several million dollars on Amazon as algo-pricing algorithms collide. Some scholars are already championing the devising of an “ethnography of robots”, exploring the ways those relate to the world and the emerging features of a software proto-culture arise and robot ethics charters have already been drafted in South Korea.

The most intriguing monster stalking our horizon is the spectre of evolved machines taking over, Terminator style, as the next step on our upward path from grunting apes. Of course this is not going to happen for many obvious reasons but it is worth considering what machine societies we will create and then the further societies that the machines will create for themselves.

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