V01CE

"Hey, Siri. Play me something I'd like." - Apple, 2018[1]

Humans are pack animals. For thousands of years, humans have "lived in hunter-gatherer family units tied by cooperative bonds at a tribal scale, having no more in common than language and distant common ancestors. Even the simplest contemporary tribal societies link family units of a few tens to create societies of a few hundred to a few thousand, held together by common sentiments of membership"[2]. In other words, humans require and actively seek out companionship, and in the modern world, this extends beyond the "normal" physiological and sociological need to be around other people.

We are surrounded, at all times, by different sorts of technology. Screens, smartphones, cars. The list is long and extensive. What I will attempt to research more thoroughly in this paper is the sort of technology framed into the category of an *intelligent digital assistant*, also known as an IDA. Well-known IDAs include applications such as Siri, Cortana, and even Microsoft Clippy from the 1990s. An IDA can be defined as "a sophisticated, powerful and intelligent digital assistant (IDA) that resides on [a] handheld/wearable device. More than just delivering a reminder, the IDA scans partner websites/apps, product catalogues, seller/product reviews and patterns to curate a small list of [items]. To perform this task, [the] IDA maintains records on personal preferences, researches multiple websites/apps and sifts through thousands of products and reviews"[3].

In my paper, I will focus on these IDAs and analyse them in regards to *why* they exist. I wish to investigate why humans choose to project a sense of pseudo-consciousness onto technology - both in the modern age, but also in older times, as this serves as a good starting point for eventual discussions. As far back as the 1960s, when computing was hardly made for common use and IDAs were near non-existent, a man named Christopher Strachey produced a piece of code that ran a version of the game *Checkers* on the Manchester Mark I computer. The program plays against a human opponent, and if the program discovers the human is cheating, the program will ask them to stop. If they continue, the program "will get increasingly uncomplimentary, and finally it will refuse to spend any more time with [them]"[4]. Even at this point in time, where computing was not a thing well-known by anyone but researchers, Strachey, the creator of the - at the time - longest piece of code ever made for that particular machine[5], had implemented a small, familial spark of personality into his program. What I wish to further research and investigate, is how this perceived sentience helps humans bond with non-conscious technology, and specifically how the addition of such features will make us

actively do so. Too many times, I have experienced people laughing at their smartphone's attempts at "conversation" or seen someone coo at their Roomba vacuum cleaner, a circular robot that drives around on your floor. It is equipped with sensors to let it know when it might be close to crashing into or falling off something, and that will make it move away from the possible collision. This fully mechanical function is not tied to any sort of artificial intelligence. The Roomba is merely registering input from its sensors and reacting, just as it was programmed to do, but that does not stop people from fuzzing over the robot as if it was a pet.

Since there are many different kinds of technologies that humans develop strange connections and bonds with, I will try to focus exclusively on IDAs such as those found on smartphones or home entertainment systems. These include IDAs such as Siri, and Cortana which "are examples of assistants that are not only intelligent but also are gradually moving toward being cognitive (i.e., able to understand human behaviour in ways that enable these IDAs to provide customized responses based on the needs of an individual)"[6]. The thing that makes these particularly interesting to me is that despite their definitive lack of actual artificial intelligence, they do possess personality. Or, at least, they have been programmed to simulate personality. Amazon Echo - or "Alexa" - knows and tells jokes. Siri will respond to certain phrases with snarky remarks. Cortana can refer to the videogame series, *Halo*, for which her character was originally made. These three programs will most likely be what the paper itself will focus on, as these three - Alexa, Siri, and Cortana - all share common characteristics.

Firstly, they are all portrayed as female, which is an interesting observation, certainly, but not one I suspect I will be investigating further, as a thorough analysis of this aspect of IDAs would take up too much space in the final work. It is deserving of its own paper, which I am unfortunately not writing at this moment. Second, they are all "programs [that] can be called into action as utterances"[7] (Cox & McLean 19). You can communicate and interact with these IDAs in a way you simply cannot do with a regular smartphone or home audio system. It feels as if they know you. They understand your tastes and desires, and they can react on your requests in ways you find satisfactory. And a last and important fact; *"they express themselves as if possessing a voice"*[8] (Ibid 2).

This idea is visualized in the 2018 advertisement of the Apple HomePod system directed by Spike Jonze[9], where a young woman is seen coming home to her flat. She then asks Siri, the personality attached to the HomePod system, to play her something she would like. This shows a familiarity with the technology, as well as comfortableness with the IDA. The woman in the advertisement knows

that Siri will do as she says. Siri will filter through the woman's music tracks, picking one that has been played multiple times or maybe added to favourites, all without the woman having to do anything other than ask.

What I have mentioned above is all extremely interesting to me. I have more articles and sources I wanted to include, but if I did, I would run out of space. Now comes the process of actually setting up the outline for the paper - something I do not feel completely comfortable doing yet.

However, I have considered multiple angles of approach for this paper. I would definitely seek to define what exactly an IDA was and how it functions, as well as explaining why the paper will be focusing on this specific type of technology over others. I would also want to go more in-depth about the bonding experience of humans to technology. In this, I would also look into how it may differ from a connection to another human being, as well as how well the relationship with an IDA can substitute a human when it comes to feeling connected and attached to something or someone. I have to be careful about this, however, as it should not become the main focus of the paper. An interesting endpoint could be a discussion about the relevancy of furthering this technology. Why does it continue to be as prevalent as it is in modern technology? What are the possible consequences of further development of IDAs? Should this sort of tech be scorned or celebrated?

I have not yet made my final decisions about the end outline, but I have thoughts. Many thoughts. Now it is up to me to get them all sorted out.

So… Siri? Can you clear my schedule for next weekend? I have a paper to write.

NOTES

1. Apple (2018*). HomePod — Welcome Home by Spike Jonze — Apple.* [video] Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3O5ryPvU6A8 [Accessed 24 Apr. 2018].

2. Thalos, Mariam and Andreou, Chrisoula. Of Human Bonding: An Essay on the Natural History of Agency. *Public Reason 1 (2009)* 46-73, p. 50.

3. Ramamurthy, R., Morya, A., Karthik, L., Vijay, M. and Gupta, A. (2017). The Coming Intelligent Digital Assistant Era and Its Impact on Online Platforms. *Cognizant 20-20 Insights*, p. 2.

4. Wardrip-Fruin, Noah. Digital Media Archaeology: Interpreting Computational Processes. *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications (2011)* 302-322, p. 305.

5. Ibid, p. 305.

6. Ramamurthy, R., Morya, A., Karthik, L., Vijay, M. and Gupta, A. (2017). The Coming Intelligent Digital Assistant Era and Its Impact on Online Platforms. *Cognizant 20-20 Insights,* p. 2.

7. Cox, G. and McLean, A. (2013). *Speaking Code.* Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, pp.17-38, p. 19.

8. Ibid, p. 19.

9. Apple (2018*). HomePod — Welcome Home by Spike Jonze — Apple.* [video] Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3O5ryPvU6A8 [Accessed 24 Apr. 2018].