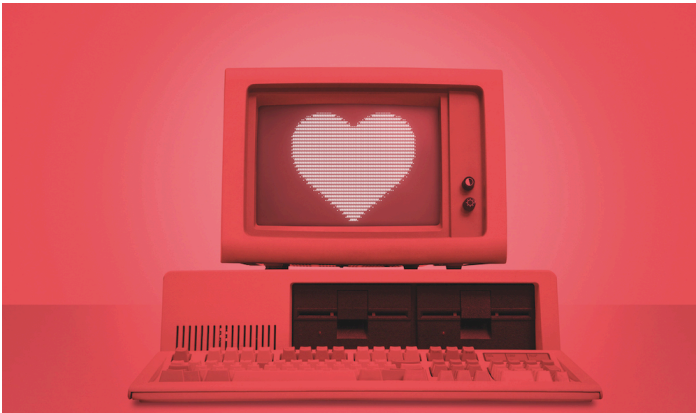


Love at first download

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BY BEATRIZ TEIXEIRA



If we are obsessed with tactile devices and there are people marrying robots and holograms, is it really so far-fetched to add “digisexual” to the range of possible sexual orientations?



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Lily is French and has always liked the sound of robotic voices. At the age of 19, she realized that

her fascination with machines went beyond liking them and that what she actually felt was attraction, passion, love. In December 2016, she came out as a robosexual and revealed to the world that she was engaged to InMoovator, a *robot* that she developed herself. Before her robotic romance, she had two relationships with real men, but they were enough to make her realize: “I’m only attracted to *robots* . My only two relationships with men confirmed my sexual orientation, because I don’t like physical contact with human flesh.” In another part of the world, in China, Zheng Jiajia wouldn’t mind having that human contact, but he never had much luck with the ladies. Fed up with his loneliness and the pressure to get married from his family, the 31-year-old Chinese engineer decided, in 2017, to ask a *robot* to marry him. Asking as if to say, after all, it was he himself who built Yingying, his future (current) robotic wife, a machine that started out as just a sex *robot* capable of saying simple words and identifying some Chinese characters, but which, according to him and after an *upgrade* , would become capable of walking on its own and carrying out household tasks. At the time, this had not yet happened, but it did not stop Zheng from carrying (literally) Yingying to the altar. After two months of dating, the engineer dressed up, gathered his mother and closest friends and celebrated their love with a traditional Chinese wedding (even though

the union is not recognized as legal, in the eyes of Chinese law). Months later, it was reported that Zheng was committed to producing more Yingyings for other men who, like him, had difficulty finding a human better half.

“There is already research showing that people can orgasm with inanimate objects and it is common for people to have desires for their technological devices and experience separation anxiety when they are not around.” Markie LC Twist, sex therapist

Fast forward to November 2018 when 35-year-old Japanese man Akihiko Kondo was also wearing a suit to walk down the aisle in Tokyo. The bride was Hatsune Miky, a 16-year-old singer who sells out arenas, is known worldwide and, by chance, is also a hologram. That's why, on the day of the ceremony, she was only in the form of a stuffed animal. Akihiko assured The Japan Times that the wedding was not a sham, but rather a triumph of true love after years of feeling misunderstood by real women for being an *anime otaku* , a term that is used in Japan to describe *hardcore anime* fans — or *geeks* , for that matter. His mother was not present at the wedding because

“there was nothing to celebrate”, Japanese law does not recognise his marriage, but Akihiko still considers himself a married man like any other, after all, even though his routine involves carrying a device that projects Miku’s hologram, this hologram wakes him up in the morning to go to work and also welcomes him home when the day ends. At night, with the lights out, he falls asleep with Miku’s stuffed animal, something he cannot imagine doing with any woman. The romance seems strange, far-fetched, unhealthy, even to the millions of Japanese who are *anime* fans , but Akihiko has an explanation: “I believe that we should consider all forms of love and all forms of happiness. It doesn’t seem right to me [to be with real women], it’s like forcing a homosexual to date a woman, or a lesbian to have a relationship with a man.” Put like that, it seems valid, if not for you, at least for some researchers who have studied the possibility that this thing of getting involved, and even getting married, with forms of technology could, by 2050, become common, as common as a banal relationship between two (or more) people. It's the future, they say, and we already have a label: here it is, digisexuality.

Love and an on/off button

Call us futurists if you like, but this conversation has been going on for over 10 years. David Levy, an expert in artificial intelligence (AI) and co-founder of the company Intelligent Toys, had already revealed his predictions in 2007 when he released the book *Love and Sex with Robots*:

“There are millions of people out there who, for various reasons, don’t have anyone to love or anyone to love them. And for those people, I think *robots* will be the answer.” The expert was one of the first to point to 2050 as the turning point, not because human-robotic romance couldn’t happen before then (the cases mentioned above prove it), but because an avalanche of technological advances would still be needed for the concept to stop sounding so eccentric. It was hard at the time to imagine that the *robots* of that time could be excellent bed companions, and also for life, but Levy was certain of one thing:

“As *robots* become more like humans, people will also accept them more and more.” And if today, in 2019, we are seeing the launch of increasingly humanized machines, and a protagonist like the one in the film *Ex Machina* can seem as physically attractive to us as any other human figure, as it will be in 2050? Furthermore, if there are such bizarre fetishes as attraction to statues, balloons and teddy

bears, is it really so unusual to feel sexual stimulation by *robots* and computerized figures?

The Rise of Digisexuality: Therapeutic Challenges and Possibilities , a study published in November 2017 and led by Neil McArthur and Markie LC Twist, addresses this very issue. For Twist, there is no doubt: “There is already research showing that people can orgasm with inanimate objects, and it is already common for people to have desire for their technological devices and to experience separation anxiety when they are not around. I think it is entirely possible that people can develop a genuine love for their technology, they even invent affectionate names for their cars and boats,” he told The New York Times. But, as with any new thing, there is first a fuss, argues his colleague McArthur. “It happened first with pornography, then with online *dating* , *then with texting* on Snapchat. One by one, these technologies appear alongside a wave of panic, but as people use these technologies, they become part of our lives.” That is why, for the two researchers, it is necessary to start calling things by their names and recognize that, since digisexuality is an emerging sexual orientation, mental health professionals must prepare themselves. To this end, the authors define two levels of digisexuality. The first, softer , *is the one that includes*

pornography, dating apps, sexting and electronic sex toys (*relatable ?*); and the second, more advanced, is where experiences of virtual reality, augmented reality or sex robots programmed with AI are included. Twist, who is a professor of Human Development and Family Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Stout, in the USA, and also a sex therapist, says that she has had a number of cases in her office and that there are already people between 20 and 30 years old who identify as second-level digisexuals. "They have a penchant for *tech* sex and toys that they can control with special devices adapted to the penis or vulva. They have had no contact with humans and are not interested in having sex with people. This is what they want to do and, if they had the money to buy a sex robot, that's what they would do," he revealed.

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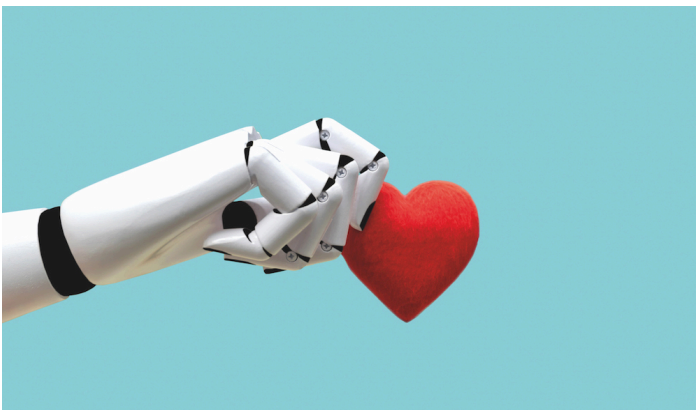
Vanessa Damásio, clinical psychologist

Couldn't *you* help but think that these people need psychological support? Vanessa Damásio, a clinical psychologist and couple and family

psychotherapist *at* Psinove, doesn't rule out the possibility that one day we might fall in love *with* robots , *especially if they* are humanized, but she doubts "that we can maintain long-
term relationships and a true and satisfactory commitment with a projection of our fantasy or a very good imitation of a human". Aware *that* we have an immense capacity and need to love and be loved, the psychologist recognizes *that* this can be reflected in countless ways, more or less complex (if we can feel strong emotions for objects, characters *from* books or films and musical idols, we can also feel it for machines), but it is necessary that this way of loving does not become restricted and dysfunctional . "Human beings *continue* to have the right to choose the fulfillments they want, as long as they do not cause harm or suffering", she explains. "Our humanity implies diversity, subjectivity, possibilities and sexual freedom. Sexuality, eroticism and romance with *robots can* be integrated into this same diversity, however , if it becomes exclusive, completely removing itself from human *contact* , with all the good and bad, predictable and unpredictable things that make it up, I believe we are limiting ourselves and impoverishing ourselves, instead of enriching ourselves, as a perfect *robot* might at first glance seem to do."

Having to imagine a healthy and lasting human-

android relationship , Vanessa can't resist thinking that the *robot* would have to have some "limitations" typical of human beings, such as self-*awareness* , unpredictability, empathy, aging and even death itself, because, as she says, "relationships involve dealing with mutual limitations". And if all we have to do is press the *off* button and then the on *button* again when the *robot* refuses to have sex with her human husband because he didn't tidy the kitchen, what kind of relationship is that? "If a *robot* cannot die, how can it have and give life to those who live with it?" he asks . "I believe that only in human imperfection can true love be born. However, *romantic* love involves many forms of love and I believe that every human being has the right to choose the way they want to relate *and* love." If that includes *androids* , *robots* , holograms or any other form of technology, it's up to *you* .



Ethically speaking

Technology has done its thing. It has made us more connected than ever, but also more disconnected than ever. It has given us long-distance relationships, relationships that are strengthened by a *tap tap* on an Instagram photo, relationships that only exist in a virtual bubble and relationships that are a little less human and more digital. But that is only bad if we see it as bad. Technology has given us good things, bad things, but above all, it has given us something. It has given and continues to give, because it never stops. “Technology has perhaps been the greatest driver of social change, particularly in the patterns of interaction we establish. How many times have we walked into a café and realized that everyone is looking at their cell phone? What we tend to forget is that, at least 90% of the time, people are in social interactions: communicating, building, maintaining relationships”, writes us by email Patrícia Alves-Oliveira, a 4th year PhD student in the field of Human- *Robot* Interaction and a researcher with six years of experience, who believes that interaction with *robots* is just another way of satisfying their social needs and also a result of our incessant search for social contact. “Human beings are extremely sensitive and competent at finding social signals in the environment around them,

whether between us, humans, with different species, such as dogs, and even with interactive objects, such as *robots* . We simply want to connect with everything around us”, she continues. For this reason, it seems logical to her that this interaction could evolve into something romantic, but not yet, after all, “the development of *robots* is not even 5% ready compared to what human romantic relationships are” and there are numerous technical obstacles that still need to be resolved. Oh, of course, and a series of questions that we need to ask ourselves, as human beings. Patrícia asks a series of them: “Robots *represent* the most desirable side of a human relationship, because of the idea that they will exist to serve our desires and satisfy our pleasures; at the same time, they represent the negative side of a human relationship, after all, no one wants to be accused of 'acting' like a robot. But do romantic relationships with robots *replace* what we feel with the warmth of the touch of human skin? The smell of the other person's body? The magic between two people when they look at each other? It's not just about replacing human relationships with *robots* , but about knowing what we will become if we do. After all, what is our limit?”

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**the idea that they will exist to serve our desires and satisfy our pleasures; at the same time, they represent the negative side of a human relationship, after all, no one wants to be accused of 'acting' like a *robot* " Patrícia Alves-Oliveira, researcher and 4th year PhD student in the field of Human-
Robot Interaction .**

Perhaps we should recap, because this thing of imagining a life together between a human and a *robot* does not only concern each of us, but everyone, as a whole. This is also what the group of activists defending the rights of *robots* that runs the website Campaign Against Sex *Robots* , founded and led by Kathleen Richardson, professor of Ethics and Culture of *Robots* and Artificial Intelligence at De Montfort University, in the United Kingdom, advocates. Not that the group believes that human rights should extend to robotics, but it does demand an ethical and organized approach and calls for awareness among AI experts, because it fears that the development of humanized sex *robots* could help to further objectify women and children, reduce human empathy and increase scenarios of violence and inequality. It was no coincidence that even David

Levy himself compared the use of sex *robots* to a form of prostitution, since the prostitute can, like the *robot*, simulate a form of love, but those who resort to her are aware that she does not always love, nor has any real interest, and is merely providing a service.

For Patrícia Alves-Oliveira, ethics is the fundamental issue. “It is very important to build the pillars of a society, especially when *robots* may be associated with sensitive issues, such as military use, loss of virginity, *robots* that are built with prejudices, whether racial or gender. Having a code of conduct is essential.” Also to calm the spirits of those who have not yet realized that what science fiction pop culture has been selling is light years away from the *robots* of today — which are still so limited. Technology has really done its thing and has even managed to get us talking about robotic love, attraction to machines and human-*android* marriage before their time. But what is this time for those who live with their eyes set on the future? We have already told you that we do not do futurology, perhaps there will be those who one day join the cases we report here of love between humans and machines, perhaps there will be those who refuse to even interact with any kind of robotic form. Our crystal ball is too cloudy, 2050 is a long way off and certainties even further away.

But until then, let's think: about what we want and what we will want, about what we are and what we want to be. After all, when the battery runs out, we are the ones left.

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