

# The Adult Genre Could Send This Tech Soaring

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Life comes at you fast.

A couple of weeks ago, I read *Supertoys Last All Summer Long* by Brian Aldiss – on which Steven Spielberg's *A.I.* was based. It's all about how humans could develop feelings for machines – and it's superlatively good. The story seemed far-fetched, however; its ethical issues a problem for subsequent generations.

Then, just a few days ago, a church warden was jailed for importing a child-sized sex doll. Speaking about a closely comparable case, Hazel Stewart, from the Child Exploitation & Online Protection Centre, was quoted as saying that child sex robots were “just around the corner”.

## The robots are coming, fast – and the future may be a lot darker than we'd like

These two stories pose very challenging questions: can we love robots? And should such relationships be controlled?

Both modern and classic sci-fi has spent much of its time focusing on the relationship between humans and robots. Depicted scenarios vary widely: innocent companionship in post-apocalyptic solitude (*Silent Running*); an accidental relationship with a Siri-like operating system (*Her*); economically helpful elder care (*Robot & Frank*); and sinister, sentient lovers (*Ex Machina*). The genre has a rich seam of material, exploring our potential relationship with machines.

Sentient machines remain a long way off, but simpler companion robots are already upon us – as [our recent interview explained](#). These make no pretence of passing off as a person – and instead take on a variety of cartoon-like forms. You might regard these objects as being no substitute for a human, but the evidence suggests otherwise. Pepper robots are even being used to deliver funeral services in Japan. This unusual use case uncannily echoes Douglas Adams' Electric Monk:

*The Electric Monk was a labour-saving device, like a dishwasher or a video recorder. Dishwashers washed tedious dishes for you, thus saving you the bother of washing them yourself, video recorders watched tedious television for you, thus saving you the bother of looking at it yourself; Electric Monks believed things for you, thus saving you what was becoming an increasingly onerous task, that of believing all the things the world expected you to believe.*

When it comes to understanding how companion robots will be used in future, current commercial trends are signalling one possible way – and it's not one that everyone will be comfortable with. Just like in so many other aspects of technology, the road to adoption of companion robots is being paved by sex. What's more, there's potentially big money in it. You might spend a few tenners on an [Amazon Echo](#) – but this expenditure pales into insignificance, compared to the car-sized cheques some people are now writing to acquire life-like sex dolls. If this niche trend ultimately goes mainstream, there could be a very large new market forming.

The industry's current offerings are not much more realistic than a lingerie-shop mannequin. But add in AI speech, emotional recognition, and decent mechatronics – and it's conceivable that shoppers could soon buy something far more realistic. For some consumers, the idea of a sex robot may then begin to become much more acceptable. Of course, we're not talking the technology of *The Terminator*, here – and it will be many decades before such creations will fool any. But no gets porn confused for a real person; you don't have to think something is alive to get turned on by it.

You might think that this vision is hopelessly far-fetched – but technology marches on. The first time I saw a demonstration of internet porn it was just a tiny, grainy clip; it took an age to download, and was over in seconds. I remembered thinking “Is that it?” and I just couldn't see how anyone would be interested. I doubt I was alone in that view, and I'm sure most early pioneers of the internet did not imagine the rise of porn, either. However, a primary use case (in terms of data exchanged) has indeed turned out to be pornography. Estimates are disputed, but perhaps around 10%-15% of traffic is currently adult material.

Yup – over one in ten bytes currently flying around the interwebs are on their way to someone enjoying a “private moment”.

## As the *Avenue Q* song accurately states: “The internet is for porn”

And it's not just the internet. Adult content has been the driving force behind a huge range of technologies. Everything from VHS to online payments have been spread rapidly by people's desire to turn generic technology to sexual ends. Robotics clearly has a start when it comes to sex. As you can see from our [entertaining interview](#) with the founders of Lovehoney, society has been making electrical sex objects for a long while, now. This creativity has come well in advance of any ability to impart these

devices with synthetic emotions or intelligence. Indeed, the desire to mechanise sex has very deep roots: in Victorian times, doctors had mechanical vibrators to cure all manner of supposed ills, apparently caused by women's sexual frustration. I know a retired GP, who has such a device in a collection of antique medical instruments and curiosities.

I'm sure you'll probably want to know whether you can make any money, from this strange potential future of sex robots. Please do check back tomorrow – when we'll identify some potential investment strategies.

Meanwhile, I'd love to hear your thoughts on this controversial subject: [andrew@southbankresearch.com](mailto:andrew@southbankresearch.com).

Best,

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