Sex Robots from the Perspective of Machine Ethics

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Abstract

This extended abstract explains firstly the term and the phenomenon of sex robots and the foundations of machine ethics. Secondly it poses questions related to sex robots as moral subjects, from a general and a specific perspective, aiming at assisting manufacturers and developers. In the full paper, those are evaluated and explained in detail. Additionally, the fields of applied ethics are included to work out the implications for humans as moral objects. At the end, the author summarizes the findings. Machine ethics, from his point of view, may help to construct sex robots which are moral machines in their appearance and in their behaviour.

1 Introduction

The present extended abstract explains firstly the term and the phenomenon of sex robots and the foundations of machine ethics. Secondly it poses questions related to sex robots as moral subjects to assist manufacturers and developers. In the full paper, those are evaluated and explained in detail. Additionally, the specific ethics are included to work out the implications for humans as moral objects. At the end, the author summarizes the findings.

2 Robotic Sex and Sex Robots

Robotic sex, as sex with and among robots, is a subject of science fiction, both literature and film, and of computer games. However it is also considered on the healthcare sector, for instance as a help for handicapped or old people, and for support in therapies (Bendel 2015). Newspapers and magazines are enthusiastic about robotic sex, and eager academic discussions are going on about it. Sex with robots, within the meaning of sex between man and machine, is usually handled through sex robots, but also other service and even industrial robots come to question. Sex robots can be defined as robots which are designed for the purpose of sex with all manner of interested and capable people – men and women, teenagers and seniors, black and white.

Depending on the budget and the taste, sex robots are available as a handy toy or as a life-size shape (Bendel 2015). They help people reach fun and satisfaction through stimulation or penetration. Some have natural language skills and arousing voices, and one should not forget that verbal eroticism is very popular in chats, and phone sex was in high demand for a long time. The sexual interactions in virtual reality applications can also be used for comparison. The advantages of sex robots are their constant

availability, relatively high hygiene standards if handled properly, and unburdening of sex workers of all genders. Their drawbacks are the limited bandwidth of satisfaction and the current low acceptance by the population.

There are several products and approaches. Just a few examples may suffice. Roxxxy is a sexbot which according to information from the company's website (www.truecompanion.com) is able to listen and speak and to respond to touching. Several personalities can be chosen from, ranging from "Wild Wendy" to "Frigid Farrah". The male equivalent is called Rocky, a name which is reminiscent of the famous film figure. Companies like Abyss Creations und Doll Sweet try to develop lifelike love dolls with convincing skin and flesh (Bendel 2016). In 2015, media reported that the manufacturer of Pepper cautioned against sex with its conventional service robot (Wendel 2015). This shows that not only sex robots and love dolls are potential candidates in this field.

3   The Discipline of Machine Ethics

Machine ethics refers to the morality of semi-autonomous or autonomous machines like service robots, self-driving cars or certain civil respectively military drones (Anderson/Anderson 2011). Hence these machines are new and strange subjects of morality. They decide and act in situations where they are left alone, either by following pre-defined rules or by comparing the situations to selected case models, or as machines capable of learning (Bendel 2014). Moral machines have been known for some years, at least as concepts and prototypes (Wallach/Allen 2009).

The term of morality in this context has been criticized by scientists and journalists, although it is explicitly referenced to machines, and does not imply that machines behave to the same extent as humans (Bendel 2015). At least the term "morality" can be applied to machines metaphorically.

4   The Perspective of Machine Ethics

The following collection is meant as a quick and easy way to sensitize the developers. The general questions of machine ethics in this context are (Bendel 2015):

- Should the sex robot have moral skills, and if yes, which ones?
- Should it follow defined rules only (duty ethics), or should it be able to estimate the consequences of its actions (consequential ethics) and weigh pros and cons for decision-making?
- Should the moral machine be implemented as a self-learning system?
- Do other normative models apply, for instance the ethics of virtue or the contract theory?
- How autonomous should the sex robot be, and for which reason?

There are more specific questions, when we include the sex partner and when we consider not only the robot's behavior but also its appearance (Bendel 2015):

- Should the robot become active on its own, and entice the partner to have sex?
- Should it be able, in extreme cases, to refuse performing the act?
- Should it make clear to the human being that it is no more than a machine?
- Should design and realization fulfil moral criteria, for instance should child-like sex robots be prohibited?
- Should the appearance be "politically correct", in terms of race and ethnicity, and what does this means concretely?
- Should there be novelty options for stimulation and seduction, or should the robots follow human role models?
- Should conventional service robots feature extensions to enhance the possibilities or should they be as "unsexual" as possible?

Machine ethics as a design discipline is crucial in designing adequate sex robots, but applied ethics with its reflection approaches is also important. Below some questions from this perspective (Bendel 2015):

- How to process the data the robot collects and evaluates to better satisfy the partner's needs or to inform companies?
- Who is liable for injuries or contamination caused by the use of the machines?
- How to handle frustration, uncertainty and shame caused by the robot?
- Does the robot replace or support human love partners?
- Is robotic sex an indication of raw and crude tendencies, does it promote the idea that a sex partner has to be available at all times?
- Should robots be available everywhere, and should it be possible to use them everywhere and anytime?
- Should children and teens be permitted to have access to robots, and, if so, under which circumstances?

These questions might be answered from the perspective of information, technical, business, medical and sexual ethics. Partly they are also related to legal matters.

5   Summary and Outlook

All in all robot sex is a highly sensitive field (Bendel 2015). Those who are substituted by a focused machine might feel rejected. Those who have to have intercourse with a sex robot for having no other choice might suffer, as well as those who cannot afford such a high-end gadget. Machine ethics may help to construct sex robots which are moral machines in their appearance and in their behaviour. After the right questions have been posed, the right answers have to be provided, which is the job of machine ethicists, roboticists and sex experts – and of the whole society.

Literature

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