

Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other

By Sherry Turkle

Technology proposes itself as the architect of our intimacies. These days, it suggests substitutions that put the real on the run. The advertising for Second Life, a virtual world where you get to build an avatar, a house, a family, and a social life, basically says, “Finally, a place to love your body, love your friends, and love your life.”¹ On Second Life, a lot of people, as represented by their avatars, are richer than they are in first life and a lot younger, thinner, and better dressed. And we are smitten with the idea of sociable robots, which most people first meet in the guise of artificial pets. Zhu Zhu pet hamsters, the “it” toy of the 2009–2010 holiday season, are presented as “better” than any real pet could be. We are told they are lovable and responsive, don’t require cleanup, and will never die.

Technology is seductive when what it offers meets our human vulnerabilities. And as it turns out, we are very vulnerable indeed. We are lonely but fearful of intimacy. Digital connections and the sociable robot may offer the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship. Our networked life allows us to hide from each other, even as we are tethered to each other. We’d rather text than talk. ...

Computers no longer wait for humans to project meaning onto them. Now, sociable robots meet our gaze, speak to us, and learn to recognize us. They ask us to take care of them; in response, we imagine that they might care for us in return. Indeed, among the most talked about robotic designs are in the area of care and companionship. In summer 2010, there are enthusiastic reports in the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal on robotic teachers, companions, and therapists. And Microsoft demonstrates a virtual human, Milo, that recognizes the people it interacts with and whose personality is sculpted by them. Tellingly, in the video that introduces Milo to the public, a young man begins by playing games with Milo in a virtual garden; by the end of the demonstration, things have heated up—he confides in Milo after being told off by his parents.

We are challenged to ask what such things augur. Some people are looking for robots to clean rugs and help with the laundry. Others hope for a mechanical bride. As sociable robots propose themselves as substitutes for people, new networked devices offer us machine-mediated relationships with each other, another kind of substitution. We romance the robot and become inseparable from our smartphones. As this happens, we remake ourselves and our relationships with each other through our new intimacy with machines. People talk about Web access on their BlackBerries as “the place for hope” in life, the place where loneliness can be defeated. A woman in her late sixties describes her new iPhone: “It’s like having a little Times Square in my pocketbook. All lights. All the people I could meet.” People are lonely. The network is seductive. But if we are always on, we may deny ourselves the rewards of solitude.

I am a psychoanalytically trained psychologist. Both by temperament and profession, I place high value on relationships of intimacy and authenticity. Granting that an AI might develop its own origami of lovemaking positions, I am troubled by the idea of seeking intimacy with a machine that has no feelings, can have no feelings, and is really just a clever collection of “as if” performances, behaving as if it cared, as if it understood us. Authenticity, for me, follows from the ability to put oneself in the place of another, to relate to the other because of a shared store of human experiences: We are born, have families, and know loss and the reality of death. A robot, however sophisticated, is patently out of this loop.

Connectivity and Its Discontents

As we instant-message, e-mail, text, and Twitter, technology redraws the boundaries between intimacy and solitude. We talk of getting “rid” of our e-mails, as though these notes are so much excess baggage. Teenagers avoid making telephone calls, fearful that they “reveal too much.” They would rather text than talk. Adults, too, choose keyboards over the human voice. It is more efficient they say. Things that happen in “real time” take too much time. Tethered to technology, we are shaken when that world “unplugged” does not signify, does not satisfy. After an evening of avatar-to-avatar talk in a networked game, we feel at one moment in possession of a full social life and in the next curiously isolated, in tenuous complicity with strangers. We build a following on Facebook or MySpace and wonder to what degree our followers are friends. We recreate ourselves as online personae and give ourselves new bodies, homes, jobs, and romances. Yet, suddenly, in the half-light of virtual community, we may feel utterly alone. As we distribute ourselves, we may abandon ourselves. Sometimes people experience no sense of having communicated after hours of connection. And they report feelings of closeness when they are paying little attention. In all of this, there is a nagging question: Does virtual intimacy degrade our experience of the other kind and, indeed, of all encounters of any kind?

The blurring of intimacy and solitude may reach its starkest expression when a robot is proposed as a romantic partner. But for most people it begins when one creates a profile on a social-networking site or builds a persona or avatar for a game or virtual world. Over time, such performances of identity may feel like identity itself. And this is where robotics and the networked life first intersect. For the performance of caring is all that robots, no matter how sociable, know how to do.

I was enthusiastic about online worlds as “identity workshops” when they first appeared, and all of their possibilities remain. Creating an avatar – perhaps of a different age, a different gender, a different temperament – is a way to explore the self. But if you’re spending three, four, or five hours a day in an online game or virtual world (a time commitment that is not unusual), there’s got to be someplace you’re not. And that someplace you’re not is often with your family and friends – sitting around, playing Scrabble face-to-face, taking a walk, watching a movie together in the old-fashioned way. And with performance can come disorientation. You might have begun your online life in a spirit of compensation. If you were lonely and isolated, it seemed better than nothing. But online, you’re slim, rich, and buffed up, and you feel you have

more opportunities than in the real world. So here too, better than nothing can become better than something – or better than anything. Not surprisingly, people report feeling let down when they move from the virtual to the real world. It is not uncommon to see people fidget with their smartphones, looking for virtual paces where they might once again be more.

Sociable robots and online life both suggest the possibility of relationships the way we want them. Just as we can program a made-to-measure robot, we can reinvent ourselves as comely avatars. We can write the Facebook profile that pleases us. We can edit our messages until they project the self we want to be. And we can keep things short and sweet. Our new media are well suited for accomplishing the rudimentary. And because this is what technology serves up, we reduce our expectations of each other. An impatient high school senior says, “If you really need to reach me, just shoot me a text.” He sounds just like my colleagues on a consulting job, who tell me they would prefer to communicate with “real-time” texts.

Online connections were first conceived as a substitute for face-to-face contact, when the latter was for some reason impractical: Don’t have time to make a phone call? Shoot off a text message. But very quickly, the text message became the connection of choice. We discovered the network – the world of connectivity – to be uniquely suited to the overworked and overscheduled life it makes possible. And now we look to the network to defend us against loneliness, even as we use it to control the intensity of our connections. Technology makes it easy to communicate when we wish and to disengage at will.

These days, whether you are online or not, it is easy for people to end up unsure if they are closer together or further apart. I remember my own sense of disorientation the first time I realized that I was “alone together.” I had traveled an exhausting thirty-six hours to attend a conference on advanced robotic technology held in central Japan. The packed grand ballroom was Wi-Fi enabled: The speaker was using the web for his presentation, laptops were open throughout the audience, fingers were flying, and there was a sense of great concentration and intensity. But not many in the audience were attending to the speaker. Most people seemed to be doing their e-mail, downloading files, and surfing the net. The man next to me was searching for a *New Yorker* cartoon to illustrate his upcoming presentation. Every once in a while, audience members gave the speaker some attention, lowering their laptop screens in a kind of curtsy, a gesture of courtesy.

Outside, in the hallways, the people milling around me were looking past me to virtual others. They were on their laptops and their phones, connecting to colleagues at the conference going on around them and to others around the globe. There but not there. Of course, clusters of people chatted with each other, making dinner plans, “networking” in that old sense of the word, the one that implies having a coffee or sharing a meal. But at this conference, it was clear that what people mostly want from public space is to be alone with their personal networks. It is good to come together physically, but it is more important to stay tethered to our devices. I thought of how Sigmund Freud considered the power of communities both to shape and to subvert us, and a psychoanalytic pun came to mind: “connectivity and its discontents.”

The phrase comes back to me months later as I interview management consultants who seem to have lost touch with their best instincts for what makes them competitive. They complain about the BlackBerry revolution, yet accept it as inevitable while decrying it as corrosive. They say they used to talk to each other as they waited to give presentations or took taxis to the airport; now they spend that time doing e-mail. Some tell me they are making better use of their “downtime,” but they argue without conviction. The time that they once used to talk as they waited for appointments or drove to the airport was never downtime. It was the time when far-flung global teams solidified relationships and refined ideas.

In corporations, among friends, and within academic departments, people readily admit that they would rather leave a voicemail or send an e-mail than talk face to face. Some who say “I live my life on my BlackBerry” are forthright about avoiding the “real-time” commitment of a phone call. The new technologies allow us to “dial down” human contact, to titrate its nature and extent. I recently overheard a conversation in a restaurant between two women. “No one answers the phone in our house anymore,” the first woman proclaimed with some consternation. “It used to be that the kids would race to pick up the phone. Now they are up in their rooms, knowing no one is going to call them and texting and going on Facebook or whatever instead.” Parents with teenage children will be nodding at this very familiar story in recognition and perhaps a sense of wonderment that this has happened, and so quickly. And teenagers will simply be saying, “Well, what’s your point?”

Only a decade ago, I would have been mystified that fifteen-year-olds in my urban neighborhood, a neighborhood of parks and shopping malls, of front stoops and coffee shops, would feel the need to send and receive close to six thousand messages a month via portable digital devices or that best friends would assume that when they visited, it would usually be on the virtual real estate of Facebook. It might have seemed intrusive, if not illegal, that my mobile phone would tell me the location of all my acquaintances within a ten-mile radius. But these days we are accustomed to all this. Life in a media bubble has come to seem natural. So has the end of a certain public etiquette: On the street, we speak into the invisible microphones on our mobile phones and appear to be talking to ourselves. We share intimacies with the air as though unconcerned about who can hear us or the details of our physical surroundings.

The New Real?

I once described the computer as a second self, a mirror of mind. Now the metaphor no longer goes far enough. Our new devices provide space for the emergence of a new state of the self, itself split between the screen and the physical real, wired into existence through technology.

Teenagers tell me they sleep with their cell phone, and even when it isn’t on their person, when it has been banished to the school locker, for instance, they know when their phone is vibrating. The technology has become like a phantom limb, it is so much a part of them. These young people are among the first to grow up with an expectation of continuous connection: always on and always on them. And they are among the first to grow up not necessarily thinking of simulation as second best. All of this makes them fluent with technology but brings a

set of new insecurities. They nurture friendships on social-networking sites and then wonder if they are among friends. They are connected all day but are not sure if they have communicated. They become confused about companionship. Can they find it in their lives on the screen? Could they find it with a robot? Their digitized friendships – played out with emoticon emotions, so often predicated on rapid response rather than reflection – may prepare them, at times through nothing more than their superficiality, for relationships that could bring superficiality to a higher power – that is, for relationships with the inanimate. They come to accept lower expectations for connection and, finally, the idea that robot friendships could be sufficient unto the day.

Overwhelmed by the volume and velocity of our lives, we turn to technology to help us find time. But technology makes us busier than ever and ever more in search of retreat. Gradually, we come to see our online life as life itself. We come to see what robots offer as relationship. The simplification of relationship is no longer a source of complaint. It becomes what we want. These seem the gathering clouds of a perfect storm.

Technology reshapes the landscape of our emotional lives, but is it offering us the lives we want to lead? Many roboticists are enthusiastic about having robots tend to our children and our aging parents, for instance. Are these psychologically, socially, and ethically acceptable propositions? What are our responsibilities here? And are we comfortable with virtual environments that propose themselves not as places for recreation but as new worlds to live in? What do we have, now that we have what we say we want – now that we have what technology makes easy? This is the time to begin these conversations, together. It is too late to leave the future to the futurists.

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