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Period 2

I didn’t have as much as low expectations for the novella as I did have no expectations. Science fiction isn’t really the type of genre that I prefer to read, but *The Lifecycle of Software Objects* shattered any presumptions that I could have had. I was surprised by the bittersweet love story between Ava and Derek that appeared to be a subplot. Romance didn’t seem to be the type of topic that would be talked about in a book that covered clinical topics like computer science and artificial intelligence. However, that should have been the first clue that the story wasn’t going to be so cut dry as I initially thought.

As I was beginning to read the first few chapters, I had a terrible feeling that the owners of the digients were getting… dare I say, attached to the digients, which were more robot than human or even animal. I was reminded of NASA’s Mars rover, Curiosity, and the programmers that played Happy Birthday to it on its first year since landing on the planet. The programmers described the date (August 5th) as its birthday. Curiosity was much more machine than human compared to the digients of the novella, yet humans grew so attached to it. On a YouTube video’s comment section, you can even see people describing their fondness for the robot, how they want to hug it, or sadness that it was alone in the Martian landscape during its first birthday. Meanwhile, Jax has hobbies like dancing and goes on forums for Tetrabrake and Marco and Polo have their own opinions on TV shows. They are even more human than a Mars rover, due to an amazing feat of science, yet the effects of such consciousness are scarier. It causes an illusion that the digients were *actually* human.

This very illusion causes the lives of both Ava and Derek to change drastically, resulting in limited job opportunities for Ava and a divorce for Derek. They center their whole lives around the digients they raised. They truly believed that one day, their digients would be able to function in society as an independent entity. Somehow they don’t see a problem with this.

I still found it upsetting. It was contrary that they were willing to put so much effort into an *AI*, of all things. Nevertheless, the fact that they were willing to consider it a human, that there seemed to be digient rights organizations within the novella even though actual humans face real inequality and discrimination. Or that there were companies like Binary Desire that approached digients with the intention that they could one day be used as an equivalent for a human for sex. The comparison of using the digients for sexual pleasure to homosexuality was especially disturbing, as was Ava’s consideration for a zoophile ex-coworker of hers, and how she comes to accept the thought of a digient and human being in a romantic relationship with each other. Being attracted to the same gender was not the same as being sexually attracted to an animal (or AI robot, in this case!) and it was frustrating to read the words off the page.

Despite my own opinions, the thought processes of the main characters did serve up as a wake up call. Ethics in CS has always been something I’m interested in, since many consider science to be devoid of empathy or understanding of the implications of an experiment in reality, but it becomes much harder to judge these topics when it comes to AI. Especially as some think of AI as teaching a machine how to do things a human can, just more effectively and efficiently. When a researcher is in the same shoes as those of Ava and Derek, at what checkpoint can they definitely say a machine learning algorithm is capable of rational thought and decision making? It is also important to consider whether those or the most important aspects of determining whether or not something is considered “human.” Additionally, it’s easy for me to consider the digients as nothing more than robots, but what about the people who have spent a lifetime caring for them? When does something stop being an AI and become a living thing? Is there a truly objective way to measure an object’s humanity? Is it even a good thing for it to be treated as a human?

As the novella discusses, legal and moral acknowledgement of a digient as an independent person entails a lot. There are discussions to be had about consent, money, and, most annoyingly of all, even taxes. However, maybe it isn’t just intellect that determines an individual’s humanity, like what I had thought. *The Lifecycle of Software Objects* is a science fiction novella, yes, but it touches on topics like empathy, kindness, and romance. Ava and Derek are both emotional, despite how they might try to rationalize their feelings. It quickly becomes unrealistic to rely on purely mathematical heuristics or calculations to categorize a digient as humanistic. Perhaps, it’s really the thread of being a recipient of love that makes something human. To be worthy of affection. Perhaps it shouldn’t have been that surprising to see Ava and Derek be devoted to their digients, when modern day people think their rumbas are cute. Whatever the case, it becomes abundantly clear that judging an AI on how humanlike it is is a very messy gray area in a world that is black and white.