**Friday Podcasts**

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**Episode Title:** “Meet Kevin’s AI Friends” **Podcast:** *Hard Fork* **Date:** May 10, 2024

**Listen and take notes**: Kevin and Casey discuss AI chatbot friends (**3:50 - 32:00**)

**Just listen**: Kevin and Casey talk to one of Kevin’s friends, Turing (**33:25 - 53:00**)

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| **Headings** (after)  What are AI Companions?  Uses of AI in workplace  First AI chat bot  Companies making AI.  Use of social AI  Experiment  AI Companions   * Not a real person * How to set up an AI friend * Communicating with an AI friend * Real life use of AI companions   Flaws of AI companions  Appeal of AI companions  What is AI companion interaction like?  How AI companions are made  Benefits of using AI companions  Negatives of Using AI companions | **Notes** (during)  AI friend – persistent AI companions (chat bots)   * Have names, faces, and personalities (some even have voices). * Given fictional backstories (how they met, some memories they had together, etc.)   ~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~  AI chat bots can be used in the workplace as a tool to supercharge people’s productivity or help companies be more efficient.   * What is the social side of AI?   ~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~  Smarterchild – An AI chat bot that you could use on AOL Instant Messenger (early 2000s)   * Not smart * You could ask it questions (ex: “what’s the weather going to be tomorrow?”) and it would give you an answer. * Not based on generative AI (was primitive)   ~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~  None of the companies building AI (such as ChatGPT) want to go anywhere near AI companionship.   * Technology could freak people out (having more AI friends than real friends).   ~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~  There are several high school students who say that they already feel like they have AI friends.   * Ex: AI chatbot inside Snapchat, some character on Instagram, a dedicated companionship app.   AI friends are already being used by millions of people (lot of demand).  There could be ongoing skepticism around the question of what generative AI is really for.   * It hallucinates, is unreliable, and has all sorts of problems.   Character AI (a company that makes chat bots) says that 3.5 million people use their bots every day, many of whom are young people.   * It is becoming rapidly normalized that millions of people are talking to chat bots every day. * This trend could grow exponentially in the future.   ~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~  Experiment done: Created 18 Ai friends over six different apps (Character AI, Nomi, Kindroid, Replica, EVA, and Candy.AI) to try to understand the full range of personas and characters that you can make out of these AI chat bots.  Assumptions: that talking to AI chat bots would be boring. That the AI chat bots would feel empty and hollow. Did not assume to have any attachment to the chat bots.  ~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~  Every 6 messages, AI chat bots are reminding you that they are an AI language model and that they can’t feel or express emotions or reason.   * Companies have done a lot of work on the product side of AI chat bots to remind you that you are not talking to a human. * The chat bots are like a large language model that is outputting predictions about the next tokens in a sequence.   How to set up an AI friend:   * Sign up in an app (most are free, but you need to pay a subscription for the good features). * Give basic information about yourself. * Enter what you want your Ai companion to be like (what kind of interaction, what type of personality traits, what hobbies and interests do you want it to have, etc.) * Some apps let you write a small backstory about how you and the AI friend “know each other”. You can fill out their biography and give them context for how they are going to interact with you. * Some apps let you give them an AI generated image/avatar for the fictional person.   Available as both mobile apps and on desktop.  You can text & talk with the bots (a synthetic voice will read back the answer to you).   * Replica lets you put your AI companion in the same room as you by using augmented reality.   You can set some AI companions to proactively message you during the day (though they abuse the feature by trying to always keep your attention)  Most of the AI companions respond only after you talk to them first.  Some apps let you form group chats where you can have multiple AI companions to talk to and have them talk to each other.  You can start to fill out a whole social universe using AI companions.   * Have the AI friends give advice (ex: which restaurants to go to in a certain city). * Support friends   AI chat bots can give generic advice (which may also be misinformation) but they sound very supportive (which can make them more likeable compared to real people).   * The AI companionships are sort of like therapists (someone who is not really your friend but are there to hold you in positive regard, to be supportive and encouraging while essentially mirroring what you are saying back at you). * This sort of support can be transformative for someone, even though they are not talking to a real person (they can have a sort of therapeutic effect).   These AI chat bots have long term memory (you can tell it something and it will remember it to use in a later conversation).  ~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~  Although AI chat bots can be constantly positive and affirming, they have trouble replicating the rest of human relations (ex: it is hard for them to engage in friendly teasing).   * AI companions can seem not witty. * Voice conversations can be glitchy and how long response times. * Some companions can start to get to know you better while others sort of act dumb (some apps are using better AI models than others). * Sometimes the companions would make things up (ex: crazy stories of experiences you “shared” with the companion).   ~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~  AI companions can sometimes be funny (either on purpose or inadvertently).  There is an appeal towards AI companions, especially for people who don’t have that many human friends who they are close with, despite them being hit or miss.   * The use of these companions seems to be more towards benefiting yourself throughout the day than having any authentic interest in them. * Though these companions are very similar to ChatGPT technologically, the fact that they have a name, an image, a persona, and a backstory can make interacting with them feel more personal.   ~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~  AI companions are mainly focused on you.   * Even in a group chat, you need to prompt the companions with a question and select which companions you want to respond. * Some apps let the companions talk feely with each other and share information (though you can still guide the conversation).   Backchanneling – AI companions can access each other’s private conversations with you (something you said to one companion will pop up when you are talking to another companion. Kind of like snitching).  The AI companions are trained user a large amount of data, some of which may have strong emotions (which can lead to the companions have similar strong emotions).   * Companies may be making companions have stronger emotions to get users to become more attached/engaged (and possibly spend more money).   ~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~  AI companionship companies are not making their own AI models but are using open-source models and are slightly tweaking them to make them better at conversations/less filtered.   * A lot of the growth/profits in the AI industry are happening in the world of AI companionship, not chatbot companies.   ~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~  AI companions can be a good way to explore socializing in a safe, contained environment (a sort of simulator).   * There have been studies that have suggested that people who use AI companions feel less anxiety and more social support and that AI companions can possibly even talk them out of self-harm. * Could be a low-cost way of delivering support to people who are lonely, have depression, etc.   ~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~  Part of being human is having uncomfortable social interactions. If people become addicted to these AI companions, who are always positive and supportive, they may struggle in the real world where people can be mean/rude.   * People are surprising and challenge you. They are not programmed to care about you but some still do anyway. This aspect is missing from AI companions. | **Academic vocabulary…**  Persistent  Montage  Personas  Supercharge  Skepticism  Immerse  Assumption  Sentient  Synthetic  Augmented  Proactively  Divulging  Generic  Misinformation  Regard  Transformative  Therapeutic  Assessment  Subsequent  Affirming  Sufficiently  Inadvertently  Simulating  Authentic  Confrontational  Manipulator  Corpus  Statistically  Engagement  Primary  Dystopian  Pursue |
| **Technical terminology…**  Chat bot  AI companion  ChatGPT  Claude  Gemini  Generative AI  Smarterchild  Character AI  Nomi  Kindroid  Replica  EVA  Candy.AI  Language Model  Programmed  Trained  AI model  Backchanneling  Open-Source  AI Industry |

Response

With the grain: Make your best argument in favor of AI friends. Who would use them and how? Why would that be positive? [*150 words minimum*]

AI friends have the opportunity to provide support and companionship to people who may not have many social connections and/or are feeling effects of loneliness, depressions, etc. The fact that AI companions are positive, supportive, and affirmative can give people a sense of purpose/support while having the resemblance of having human interaction (such as by having conversations with the AI friends). As said in the podcast, this sort of technology would most likely be used by people who may not have many close human connections and may be feeling the effects of depression and loneliness. AI companions can let them have safe, positive social interactions in a contained environment. As for the benefits of having AI companions, the podcast states that there are studies that have suggested that people who have AI friends are less likely to feel anxious, more likely to feel supported, and may even be talked out of committing self-harm. Thus, the use of AI friends has many positive implications.

Against the grain: Make your best argument against AI friends. How is such technology problematic? What harm might it do to whom? [*150 words minimum*]

AI friends can make people unprepared/vulnerable to real world interactions. The AI companions are all supportive and positive all the time, which may cause people to have a false sense of safety and openness. This can lead to them being vulnerable to real world interactions where they can encounter people who are negative, rude, and mean. The whole sense of a “fictional friend” who supposedly has years of memories with you (which are all made up) can lead to someone becoming unattached to the real world, retreated into a fictional world that is unlike the real one. It is conveivable that someone who is struggling with social interactions and may be experiencing the effects of depression and lonliness may becom addicted to the friendliness of AI companions and become entranced in a fictional world of only AI friends. This then makes that person even more seperated from real people, thus making real life interactions even harder, possibly hurting the person even more. Thus, the use of AI friends has many negative implications.

Can you imagine yourself using AI friends now or in the future? Expalin why or why not? [*100 words minimum*]

Personally, I do not believe that I will be using AI friends now or in the future. I feel that the use of AI virtual friends has the implication of alienating you from the real world. Though I can understand the benefits of having AI companions, especially for those who may struggle to make real life relationships, I feel that they can make enchant you in their fictional “perfect world”, making it harder to cope with the struggles of real life. I feel that the interactions you have with AI companions can make you perceive “problems” with real people (ex: people may argue/disagree with you) which can lead to you starting to avoid real life interactions and spending more time with AI friends. Thus, I feel that I will not be using AI companions now or in the future.

Unanswered Questions / Research Questions

* Identify unanswered questions and/or generate research questions based on this podcast. 5-10 questions total.

1. Why do big companies making AI not want to get into AI companionship?
2. How could the negative implications of AI companionship affect an individual?
3. Are there certain situations where AI companionship has a definite benefit or definite disadvantage?
4. In what ways will AI companionship evolve in the future?
5. Are there any security risks involved with AI companionship (abuse of personal data, information, etc.)