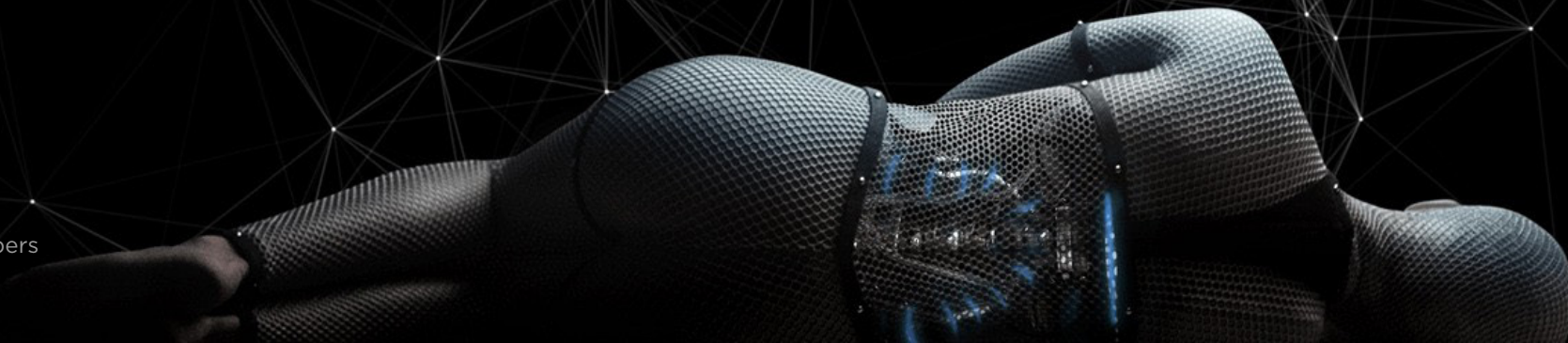# ex machina

CASE STUDY

by Tim Knott u3160716

words: 1680

AVA

CALEB

NATHAN

Ex Machina's primary storytelling platform, film, is heavy in philosophical and ethical issues that are relevant in the context of human evolution, more specifically, in the context of an idea that has been obsessed with for decades, artificial intelligence (O'Sullivan, 2015). When secondary storytelling platforms combine with this primary platform, the reality of the film comes to light. This cross-media story-world of Ex Machina inter-links with the real world as a pre-existing net-work, to demonstrate just one way that artificial intelligence could affect the human race.

There are a couple of key motifs in the film that are critical in understanding the Ex Machina storyworld; the 'turing test', Ava's drawings and human nature. Each of these motifs is represent-ed in cross-media forms that extend the narrative of the Ex Machina film.

"Caleb, a 26 year old programmer at the world's largest internet company, wins a competition to spend a week at a private mountain retreat belonging to Nathan, the reclusive CEO of the company. But when Caleb arrives at the remote location he finds that he will have to participate in a strange and fascinating experiment in which he must interact with the world's first true artificial intelligence, housed in the body of a beautiful robot girl."

- IMDb

That's pretty much the first 10 or 15 minutes of the film. What the audience witnesses happen to Caleb is what you might call 'psychological trauma'. From the initially exciting task of conducting a Turing Test (of sorts) on Ava the AI, who is 'trapped' in a room, Caleb is revealed to be the subject of Nathan's test. Ava managed to manipulate Caleb into letting her escape, eventuating in Nathan's death, Caleb's ironic entrapment and Ava's completed transformation into a 'human imposter'. The film ends by revealing a reflection of Ava in a busy intersection in the 'real' world of Ex Machina. The story-world goes a bit further. On other platforms, Ava is out communicating with the world, demonstrating she's capable of manipulating humans in the real world too.

Deviant Art

Feature Film 🔗

Released in 2015, written and directed by Alex Garland, Ex Machina went big for a small budget film. It's the primary platform for Ex Machina's story world, attracting the largest audience, over 375,000 ratings on <u>IMDb</u>, and generating most of the content. Although via a one-way communication medium and a linear story (Jenkins, 2006), audiences reacted to the films strong themes through two-way communication streams, like social media and through conversation.

Website 🔗

For people who want to find out more or get a taste of what they're in for before they see the film, they head to the Ex Machina website. The website features the trailer, glowing reviews, synopsis, cast and credits. The page acts as the hub for all things world building. While it's primarily to promote the film, as a part of the website main navigation bar there is a link to a web app named Ava Sessions.

Web App 🔗

Ava Sessions is a platform where, through a short conversation with 'Ava', she 'draws' a picture of you (or whatever picture you give her). Ava recognises highlights and shadows in the provided image and generates a photograph made up of dots and lines, resembling the image style that Ava draws in the film. This short communication with 'Ava' was a little invasive (when she asks to open your camera to take a photo). You were left with a souvenir that you could then share on social media. It is a simple and interactive simulation of Ava doing what she did in the film to earned Caleb's trust.
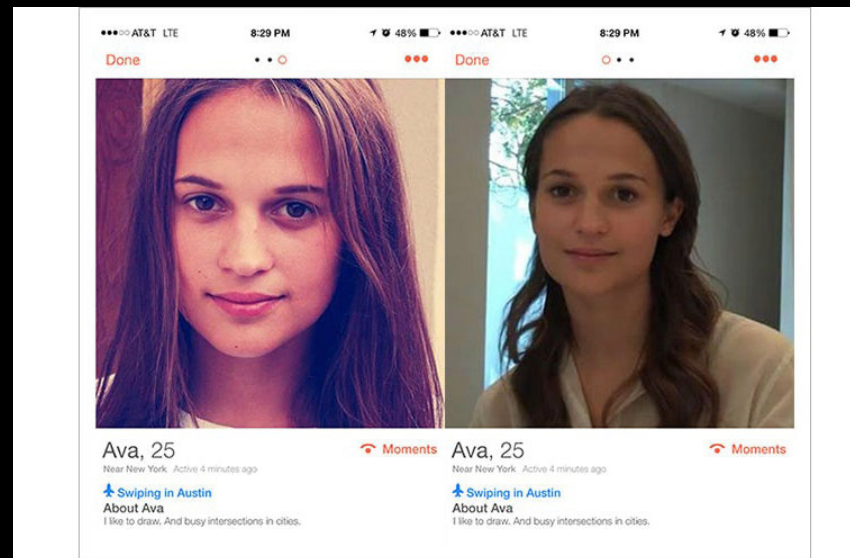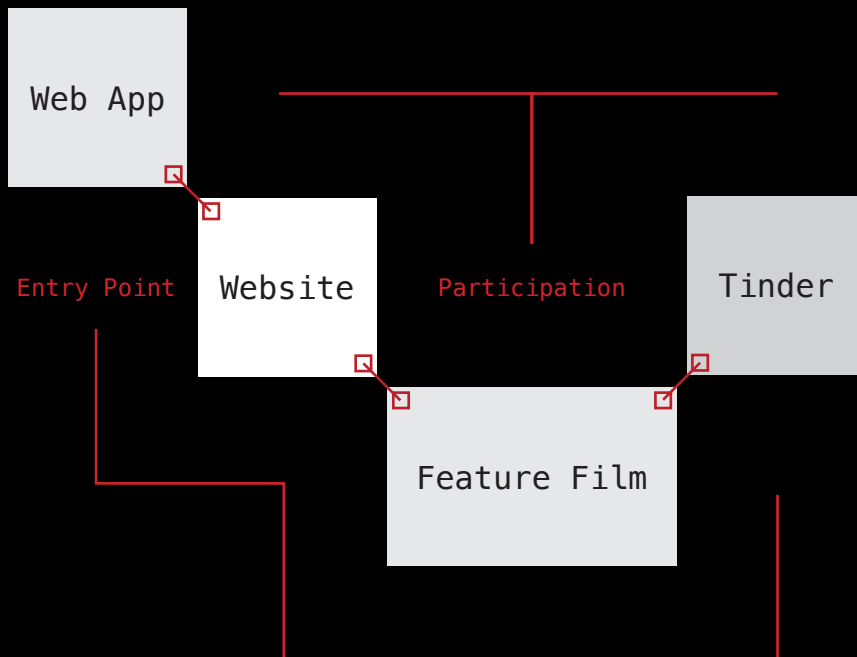
Tinder 🔗

Ex Machina's brilliant marketing campaign was controversial and that played a crucial hand in the success of the film. Dozens of guys in Denver swiped right for 'Ava' on the popular dating platform Tinder (Warren, 2015). While the guys sent 'Ava' their witty one-liners, 'Ava' replied with deep and personal questions like "had he ever been in love, what made him feel human, and what attracted him to her profile" (Ritson, 2015). After the guys answered the questions, some asked her if they wanted to meet up, Ava replied "You've passed my test. Take a look at my Instagram and let me know if I've passed yours :)" (Ritson, 2015). The marketing tactic was criticised for 'promoting' the online danger of 'cat-fishing' (Biggs, 2015), the act of pretending to be someone else over the internet (Webwise, 2017). However, that was the whole point of the exercise, to demonstrate an analogy of what AI's could become in the future.

"there is a strong interest in integrating entertainment and marketing, to create strong emotional attachments and use them to make additional sales."

- Henry Jenkins, 2006, pg.105

Marketing Week

Audience Entry Points

Web App

Website

Entry Point

Participation

Tinder

Feature Film

Juttafranzen, 2014

Analysis

The Turing Test

As each cross-media network should (Kopp, 2011), Ex Machina demonstrates the use of its CTA cycle a couple of times to engage with and direct audiences. On one occasion, the film acts as the primer, The Ex Machina website as the referral and 'Ava Sessions' as the reward. If audiences were first exposed to Ex Machina via their Tinder marketing stunt, then the stunt would act as the primer, the website as the referral, and the film as the reward. The spreadability of the storyworld isn't as impressive as it's sci-fi rivals.

Nathan's twist to the Turing test is to show that Ava is a machine, but still see if she passes as a human. He already knows that with a human body she can pass as human, but he wants to know if Caleb could see she is a machine but believe she is human. The 'real' test was to see if Ava could utilise her deceptive traits and 'human nature' to fool Caleb into getting what she wants, in Nathan's words 'What's more human than that?'.

Nathan's version of the Turing Test seems to be the predecessor to the Voight-Kampff test in Bladerunner (Hardawar, 2015). The difference is that Garland wrote Ex Machina to be terrifying to a current audience in the context of the here and now, as opposed to Dick's vision for the more advanced future. Garland's focus on the implications of a nearer future act as a part of the primer for Ex Machina's audience, to trigger a realisation from the audience as if to say "wait on, this is happening in my world today".
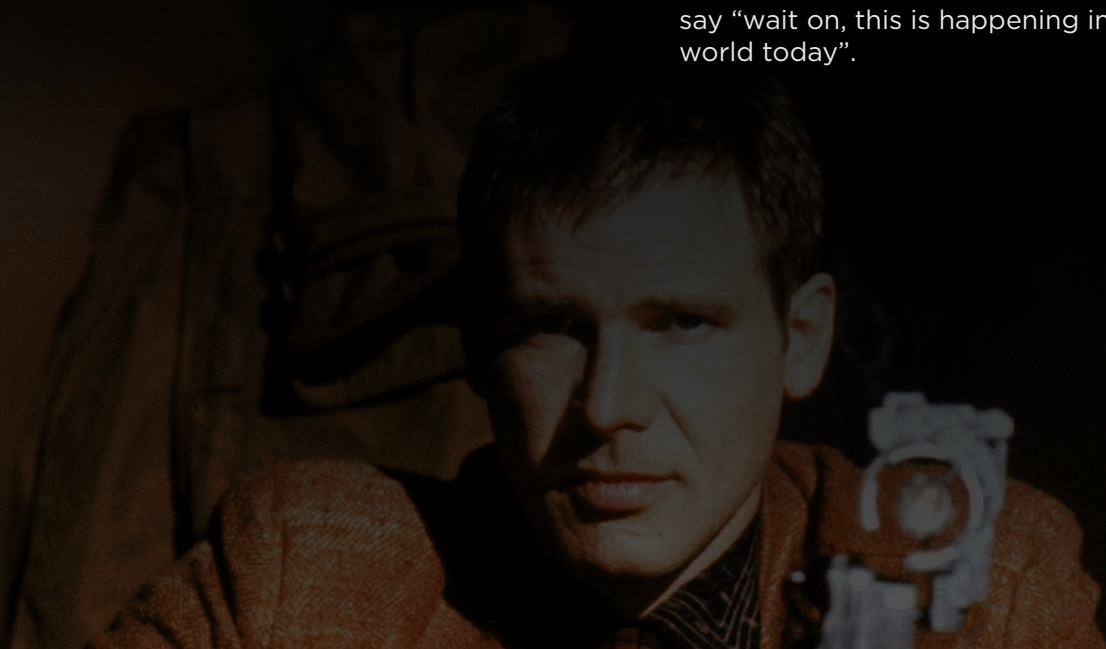
Ava's Drawings

Ex Machina's interactive 'Ava Sessions' gifts the audience a short experience that concludes with a personalised reward, being a drawing from Ava. That bridge to the film, where Ava's drawings are regarded as a significant motif, is what makes Ava Sessions interesting to the audience. What's significant about 'Ava Sessions', personally, it was a point of additive comprehension, it was that moment interacting with Ava on 'Ava Sessions' that I realised that Ex Machina interlinks with the real world, backed up by the Tinder marketing campaign. This realisation through additive comprehension tied all the media platforms together to form a collective intelligence of the Ex Machina story-world.

Human Nature

This motif throughout the Ex Machina story world is relatable to the audience. Although exaggerated, the film's depiction of human nature resonates with its audience, just look at the reviews to understand why so many people loved it and hated it. The Tinder marketing campaign could perhaps be seen as an adaptation of 'Ava Sessions', seeing as they both engage audiences through simulated conversation with Ava. However, through the 'mate matching' platform Tinder, Ava's manipulation of human nature is much more prominent in an environment that harbours emotional, or perhaps just natural, behaviour. It's Ava's understanding of human nature that makes her dangerous in the film, and as demonstrated through Tinder, AI's understanding of human nature could make it dangerous to the real world.

User Reviews

4.5 ☆

5 ☆ "Bladerunner plot line comes to now!"

5 ☆ "Definitely worth watching, especially from the perspective of our evolution being our demise."

1 ☆ "If you're a nerd and can't get a girlfriend then this is the movie for you, if you're a normal human being with a life DON'T WATCH!!"

iTunes Reviews >>

Critic Reviews

78/100

100 "It plays like Frankenstein meets Blade Runner via Hitchcock haunted by the ghosts of Charles Dickens' Great Expectations, in a film that's both highly literate and steeped in tense cat-and-mouse chills."

60   "With a sly dreaminess, Vikander steals the movie from the two males."

MetaCritic Reviews >>

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