

Text A: Excerpt from the article

No Mercy For Robots: Experiment Tests How Humans Relate To Machines

By Alix Spiegel [...]



Could you say "no" to this face? Christoph Bartneck of the University of Canterbury in New Zealand recently tested whether humans could end the life of a robot as it pleaded for survival.

Treating Machines Like Social Beings

Many people have studied machine-human relations, and at this point it's clear that without realizing it, we often treat the machines around us like social beings.

5 Consider the work of Stanford professor Clifford Nass. In 1996, he arranged a series of experiments testing whether people observe the rule of reciprocity with machines.

"Every culture has a rule of reciprocity, which roughly means, if I do something nice for you, you will do something nice for me," Nass says. "We wanted to see whether people would apply that to technology: Would they help a computer that helped them more than a computer that didn't help them?" [...]

10 So what happens when a machine begs for its life — explicitly addressing us as if it were a social being? Are we able to hold in mind that, in actual fact, this machine cares as much about being turned off as your television or your toaster — that the machine doesn't care about losing it's¹ life at all?

Bartneck's Milgram Study With Robots

15 In Bartneck's study, the robot — an expressive cat that talks like a human — sits side by side with the human research subject, and together they play a game against a computer. Half the time, the cat robot was intelligent and helpful, half the time not.

Bartneck also varied how socially skilled the cat robot was. "So, if the robot would be agreeable, the robot would ask, 'Oh, could I possibly make a suggestion now?' If it were not, it would say, 'It's my turn now. Do this!' " [...]

25 At the end of the game, whether the robot was smart or dumb, nice or mean, a scientist authority figure modeled on Milgram's would make clear that the human needed to turn the cat robot off, and it was also made clear to them what the consequences of that would be: "They would essentially eliminate everything that the robot was — all of its memories, all of its behavior, all of its personality would be gone forever."

In videos of the experiment, you can clearly see a moral struggle as the research subject deals with the pleas of the machine. "You are not really going to switch me off, are you?" the cat robot begs, and the humans sit, confused and hesitating. "Yes. No. I will switch you off!" one female research subject says, and then doesn't switch the robot off.

30 "People started to have dialogues with the robot about this," Bartneck says, "Saying, 'No! I really have to do it now, I'm sorry! But it has to be done!' But then they still wouldn't do it." There they sat, in front of a machine no more soulful than a hair dryer, a machine they knew intellectually was just a collection of electrical pulses and metal, and yet they paused.

35 And while eventually every participant killed the robot, it took them time to intellectually override their emotional queasiness — in the case of a helpful cat robot, around 35 seconds before they were able to complete the switching-off procedure. How long does it take you to switch off your stereo?

The Implications

40 On one level, there are clear practical implications to studies like these. Bartneck says the more we know about machine-human interaction, the better we can build our machines.

But on a more philosophical level, studies like these can help to track where we are in terms of our relationship to the evolving technologies in our lives.

45 "The relationship is certainly something that is in flux," Bartneck says. "There is no one way of how we deal with technology and it doesn't change — it is something that does change."

More and more intelligent machines are integrated into our lives. They come into our beds, into our bathrooms. And as they do — and as they present themselves to us differently — both Bartneck and Nass believe, our social responses to them will change.

(645 words)

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<http://www.npr.org/blogs/health/2013/01/28/170272582/do-we-treat-our-gadgets-like-they-re-human>.

Annotations

Lines

⁶ reciprocity in social psychology: responding to a positive action with another action, rewarding kind actions

¹⁴ Milgram Study experiments in the early 1960s measuring the willingness of participants to obey an authority figure who instructed them to perform acts in conflict with their personal conscience, i.e. they were persuaded to punish other participants

with painful electric shocks

³⁶ queasiness here: uneasiness