

# Alone Together

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## **INTRO**

What would you be willing to give up in order to make your relationships safe and enjoyable? Would you be willing to give up on the spoken word? The human touch? Humans themselves? We will explore the major talking points in the first section of Sherry Turkle's book, *Alone Together*: the advent of sociable robots--robots designed to mimic human social interaction, our reasons for pursuing them, and how they affect our lives.

## **PROMISES**

To begin with, the primary reason that we have pursued and continue to pursue sociable robots is that they appeal to our vulnerabilities (1). They promise us all the joys of human companionship without any of the trials, hardships, and heartaches that accompany them. In a relationship, a robot would always give you its full attention, always be available for you, never lie to you, never leave you, and most certainly never betray you. In essence they offer us the benefits of relationships without the risks.

This desire for an idealized relationship can be seen clearly when an older woman says of her robot dog, "It is better than a real dog...It won't do dangerous things, and it won't betray you...Also, it won't die suddenly and abandon you and

make you very sad” (10). Or again when one man says, “I’d rather talk to a robot. Friends can be exhausting. The robot will always be there for me. And whenever I’m done, I can walk away” (10). From the woman we see the desire to escape the risks and sadness that often accompany relationships and with the man the longing for self-focused relationships, but both are hungry for simple relationships that lack the complexity and messiness of human affairs; relationships that robots are more than happy to supply.

The second reason that we are chasing after sociable robots is so that we can escape the demands and responsibilities of the relationships that we are in but cannot abandon. In general, these are our relationships with our young children and aging parents, as both of them demand more of our time and energy than we want to give. We are also unwilling and socially prevented from leaving them in the care of cold unfeeling robots, but sociable robots are another thing entirely. Since they are able to mimic human behavior and therefore are able to provide “companionship” in addition to assistance we are far more willing to leave our parents and children in their care. In fact, a precursor to robot companions for the old has already taken hold in Japan. It turns out that some young Japanese people are too busy to visit their parents in distant nursing homes, so they have hired professional actors to visit their parents and pretend to be them and, oddly enough, their parents are more than happy to receive them (74). This sentiment is not constrained to Japan, as one man comments “That the fact that my mother has a Paro,” a robot baby hart seal that responds differently based on how aggressively it is being handled, “makes it easier for me to walk out the door,” of her nursing home (107).

We also find that parents would be more than willing to leave their children in the hands of robot nannies and baby sitters. These robots they say would be more preferable to humans because their programming would ensure that they are safe and reliable. They would not steal or hurt their children and would make sure to pay attention to them, feed them nutritious meals, and always put them in bed before bed time (71). Parents also feel that robots would be useful in the “shit and string-beans” part of child rearing as the robots could handle all of the grunt work and free them up for the more emotionally involving parts (144). In the present age however, these incredible robots are still a while off; it’s still a challenging task to get a robot to tie a shoelace, much less babysit a child unsupervised. Instead, we turn to the exploration of the current reality of robots in society.

## **FROM BETTER THAN NOTHING TO BETTER THAN ANYTHING?**

So while the sociable robots of our fantasies, those that can truly pass themselves off as humans are not here yet many of their less sophisticated cousins have already entered our lives. What I’m talking about are the Tamagotchis,

Furbies, My Real Babies, and a host of other “toys” that we have brought into our homes to entertain us but with whom we have forged a much deeper relationship. These toys while different in form and sophistication each ask of us the same thing, that we take care of them, and we are more than happy to oblige.

The simple acts that they request from us: feeding them, playing with them, and teaching them build up the foundations of a relationship that move these toys out of the category of things and into the category of companions. As Sherry Turkle says, “We are psychologically programmed not only to nurture what we love but to love what we nurture. So even simple creatures can provoke heartfelt attachment” (11). This fact is proven quite often over the course of *Alone Together* when, as an example, children claim that “I love Furby and Furby loves me” after only interacting with it for a short while (39). Another telling sign, is that children refuse to reset their Tamagotchi after it has died as they feel like the new pet will be a stranger trying to impersonate their old Tamagotchi and instead ask their parents to purchase new ones (33). Don’t be fooled into thinking that this behavior occurs only in children, as one can find it quite easily in adults as well. In fact the saddest story in the whole book is when a great grandmother, Edna, ignores her great granddaughter, Amy, in favor of a My Real Baby (116).

This preference for a robot over a human being illustrates how robots have a tendency of going from “better than nothing” to “better than anything” (64). Turkle attributes this shift with the ELIZA effect--the tendency to attach human emotions to robotic behaviors--as well as the fact that they fulfill all of the promises that they claim. It is the ELIZA effect that brings robots up to “better than nothing,” as it allows us to form relationships with these creations, and therefore makes them contenders against other humans in our lives, but it is the lack of human failings that makes them “better than anything” (64). This again is shown quite clearly in Edna’s choice of My Real Baby over Amy, as the robot made “demands that seem[ed] to suit her better than those of her great grandmother” (119).

These relationships, though considered by some to be superior to their human counterparts, hinge on the ability of the person involved to maintain the illusion that their robotic companion is alive. This self-deception is necessary because, as already stated, it is what allows us to form and continue relationships with robots. The necessity of having to maintain this illusion, along with the fact that sociable robots possess only limited capabilities, means that our relationships with them have to be confined to tightly controlled areas lest we break the spell of life that we have cast on our robotic companions and lose them as friends.

These constrained relationships are not just positive or negative but are a double-edged sword as they offer us exactly what we desire from sociable robots, “relationships with limits,” but also deny us those things that are beyond those limits (11). One of the most important things that relationships with robots deny us is growth of character and humanity that generally accompany relationships

with people. Our human friends show us new ways of thinking, introduce us to new experiences, and broaden our worlds but robots, however, will unlikely ever be able to do this for us, no matter how far we extend their limits, because we could never trust their word on something on which they have no experience.

This lack of a common shared experience, the fact that robots are robots and not humans, is where they reveal the advantage of human relationships. Robots, no matter how advanced they become, will always experience life as robots and will therefore be unable to empathize with flesh and blood humans. This lack of empathy will not prevent relationships with robots, but will prevent us from forming as deep of a relationship as one we could form with a fellow human being. As one man says, “How can I talk about sibling rivalry to something that’s never had a mother” (50)?

Another implication that arises from robots’ lack of empathy is that every emotion that they perform is just that, a performance. As Sherry Turkle succinctly puts it, “...the performance of caring is all that robots, no matter how sociable know how to do” (12). What this means is that no matter how convincing a display of emotions a robot shows it will always be a farce, along with our relationships with them. This is offset, of course, by the ELIZA effect, which is what makes human-robot relationships possible, but it does nothing to remove the underlying truth about them. In fact, a person involved in a human-robot relationship must completely avoid this truth unless they wish to move their friend back to the toy bin.

Finally, and most importantly, the lack of empathy in the relationship tends to diminish our own empathy. This is quite obvious, because as we spend more time with robots we spend less time with humans and therefore become less able to relate to them. This is especially important when we consider our children because empathy is not an innate human attribute but one that we come to acquire by interacting with other humans.(56) So if we choose to abandon ourselves and our children entirely to the care of robots, we run the very real risk of becoming unable to see ourselves in others. A risk it seems, by our thoughts and actions towards robots, we are willing to take.

## **THE ETHICS OF BEFRIENDING ROBOTS**

With the reception towards robotics as strong as it is, some bring up the moral and ethical concerns of substituting a robot in the place of a human. There is a section appropriately titled, “Don’t We Have People For These Jobs?” which delves into the ethical concerns of using robots to do things that people either don’t want to do or simply don’t have time to do. Arguments are made for providing our seniors with robotic companions because these companions would be able to devote all of their attention to the seniors. Emotional losses such as the death of a dog, which would normally be devastating for a person of elder stature,

would be eliminated because of the immortality of the machine. It was even suggested that a robot would be enough of a replacement to soften the loss of spouse (73).

While people are okay with, and encourage, integration of robotics into daily life, robots cross the line when they threaten to weaken and sever emotional bonds between family members. Fourteen year-old Chelsea objects as Turkle asks about bringing her grandmother a My Real Baby. Chelsea responds, “I don’t like it that I could be replaced by a robot, but I see how I could be.” In fact, her negative reaction extends to the point where she says “It is better that grandma be lonely than forget us because she is playing with her robot” (75). As much as we would like to benefit from these no-strings-attached relationships, in doing so we must sacrifice real relationships with other human beings. The fear isn’t of replacing a friend with a robotic companion, but rather of being replaced by a robotic companion. Turkle hints towards the breaking down of our modern network of relationships if everybody were to take the easy road promised by robotics, that eventually we would lose a part of our self by trying to gain without risk. We would lose sight of what true companionship is in the wake of all of these emulated beings.

These robotic companions promise to provide us with all the emotions associated with maintaining an active relationship, going as far as to artificially burden us with requests such as “feed me” to further the emotional bond, while concurrently freeing us of the real burden of maintaining such a relationship. They try to offer all of the benefits of a real relationship without any of the risks, however as realistic as they are created; they are never truly able to emulate a human companion. They lack a core aspect of the human persona--empathy-- and as such if we choose to ignore that aspect, then we will banish ourselves to a world of people who have been rejected for robots, making us all truly *Alone Together*.

## References

Turkle, Sherry (2011-01-11). *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. Perseus Books Group. Kindle Edition.