Sex Robots

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[00:00:00] **Christoph:** If you are ever in need for some media attention, then you only need to mix the research topics of robotics with sex. This combination is certain to get you into the papers and on TV. In the last episode of the Human-Robot Interaction podcast.

[00:00:18] We already discussed how sex robots helped bringing down the whole conference.

[00:00:24] But this enormous media attention is not imbalance with a number of actual empirical studies being performed. To this day, not a single empirical study on humans having actual sex with robots has been published in the love and sex with robots conference. Today, we will try to understand the future of human robot sexuality.

[00:00:51] **Music:** This is the Human-Robot Interaction podcast. I am your host Christoph Bartneck.

[00:01:07] **Christoph:** Humans are very creative when it comes to experimenting with their sexuality. In the TV show, The Good Place. Matt is one of the accountants who calculate the ethical value of new human behavior. Whenever a human does anything new, this value gets calculated and stored in their accounting database.

[00:01:33] Whenever another human does the same thing, accounting just looks up the original value. Humans get points for good behavior. And once they reach a certain threshold, they can enter the Good Place after their death. According to Matt, 99% of all new behaviors are weird sex things.

[00:01:59] While this is of course, comedy David Levy in his PhD thesis investigated the history of sex toys. And he then predicted not if, But when and where the first sex robots will be used. Predicting the future is always difficult. And David readily admits his overly optimistic view.

[00:02:20] **David:** Matt Mcmullen's product is a real product and it's going to make a very big impact on society. I predicted in my book 12 years ago that his company would be the first in the world to produce the commercially available sex robot. I got the timeframe a bit wrong. I thought he would do it sooner, but at least I was right in guessing that he was going to be the first.

[00:02:42] **Christoph:** David also claims to have predicted when the first computer would beat a human world champion chess player

[00:02:49] **David:** There is a, these are fields that I'm very experienced in. I've been in these fields all my life. So I have a pretty good idea of what's going on. What's been going on and I'm usually pretty accurate at predicting the rate of future progress. I successfully predicted the exact year in which a human world chess champion would first lose a match to a computer program.

[00:03:09] **Christoph:** In 1986, he predicted that Kasparov would be defeated by 1990. Although he gave his prediction room until 2085, Deep Blue won the first match against Kasparov in 1997. David receives much media attention. And he's a very convincing speaker that is often called upon when talking about this topic, but it has to be clear that he never conducted any empirical studies himself.

[00:03:40] His main contribution has been a historical view, and a prediction, nothing more and also nothing less. David has also little hesitation about the Ethics around humans having sex with robots.

[00:03:57] **David:** Ethics really tend to follow a little way behind the way that social mores is developed. And our attitudes to sex have changed a huge amount in the past hundred years, even the past 50 or 25 years. If we go back to say the beginning of the 20th century, if somebody had said to you that within a hundred years there will be men marrying men and women marrying women, you would have taken them away to the nearest lunatic asylum.

[00:04:32] Look how that has changed. Even more recently, the idea of relationships across the color bar has been in some states in the USA it's been illegal. It was illegal until comparatively recently until like during my lifetime, it changed. The same is true of certain sexual practices, which have been illegal in some parts of the United States.

[00:04:57] But more and more, I think society has realized that what two people do in their sex lives in private is their business. And I think now there's a majority attitude that people should be allowed to do what they want to do sexually as long as it's not hurting other people. So I think that there've been huge changes in our sexual mores over the past hundred years.

[00:05:25] And this change, these changes have speeded up a lot. Whereas, in the middle of the 20th century, for example, oral sex was frowned upon more than it was approved of. But nowadays oral sex is almost in those heterosexual, certainly in most heterosexual relationships. And I think the, that will continue with the advent of more and more sophisticated sex robots.

[00:05:53] And I believe that within this century by the middle of this century, I think it will be accepted in some countries, at least that that it's okay to have even a marriage with a robot. I predicted in my book that the first human robot marriages would take place in the state of Massachusetts by the year 2050, or around the year 2050.

[00:06:18] It's inevitable that such robots will appear on the market that will become very popular and they'll make eventually they all make a very big difference to our social lives and our love lives and our sex life.

[00:06:29] **Christoph:** While this is a very pragmatic view, it still does not address some of the more difficult ethical challenges. Much of our debate on sex robots gravitates around them. Would it be okay to program a robot to have non-consensual sex? Would it be okay if a robot is always available for sex? Would it be okay to have age inappropriate sexual relationships with a robot. Rob Sparrow from The Monash University explored these ethical problems.

[00:07:12] **Rob:** The first thing I think we need to do is dispel the idea that robots in the near future are going to be sentient that they're going to be thinking, feeling creatures and the ethics of our relationship with robots were they to become sentient would be radically different to the ethics of our treatment of what are essentially still, complicated machines.

[00:07:35] So my paper, my thinking about this topic is confined to the case where you don't really care about the robot itself. It's a complicated machine, like your laptop it's embodied. And importantly, I think it has representational content. It stands for something it has meaning it, it represents. So in my

reflections on sex robots, I'm interested in the sort of world of social meaning and how we evaluate simulation. So one, one way of getting a handle on this is to imagine that you discover that your ex has produced a sex robot that looks like you and is doing something that looks like raping it for instance, or maybe they come home and they beat up the sex robot that looks like you. I think most people are going to be disturbed by that possibility.

[00:08:32] And that's because they get that. There's a connection between the treatment of the robot and the attitude it expresses towards them.

[00:08:40] **Christoph:** I confronted David with the ethical issues raised by Rob Sparrow. Would it be appropriate if your wife would create a copy of you and to be you?

[00:08:50] **David:** In my view, the creating of robotic copy would be okay. But mistreating us, I don't think it is. I don't think it's right, because if one mistreats a robot, then especially if the robot is, has the appearance of a human or an animal. Then mistreating it sends a message to other people that it's okay to mistreat something that looks human like or animal like.

[00:09:12] And for example there was a paper about whether it's correct or not to kick a robotic dog. I don't think it is. I don't think it is because it sends a bad message, particularly if it's children, if a child's, let's just say their parent kicking a robotic dog, the child might well believes that it's okay to kick a real dog.

[00:09:32] So from that point of view, I think mistreating a robot is a bad thing. And there has been quite lots of debates on the over the question of whether having sex with a robot constitutes rape because the robot does not have in the same way that the human has. The possibility of rejecting the the suggestion of sex with the human.

[00:09:53] So that, that is still an open question.

[00:09:55] **Rob:** And so in that context, I do think that we need to be considering what it says about relationships between men and women or what it says, but about an individual's relationship to women that they might be acting out rape fantasies. Simulating the rape of a woman via an interaction with a sex robot.

[00:10:18] I think there are some reasons to be ethically concerned about that. I'm not sure that they I don't discuss, whether this should be prohibited or not, it's not, my work hasn't been about what the law should be. But I do think that you might think there's something morally problematic about repeatedly engaging in a fantasy of raping a woman in an interaction with a realist and realistic looking female sex robot.

[00:10:48] And so then in that context, you do need to think What makes it look like? What makes it a simulation of rape? It's that the rope, the woman in the sort of fantasy scenario doesn't consent or that there's no, or is forcibly overcome, for instance, and then you start to think what's communicated if the fantasy is that the robot always says the fantasy is that the woman always says yes to sex.

[00:11:14] And that also looks as though it has problematic political content.

[00:11:19] **Christoph:** Embers entertainment has been producing highly realistic dolls for decades. For some time now they have been working on sex robots through their RealBotics company.

[00:11:33] **Rob:** But there's also something about the embodiment of the robot. For some people actually, particularly in the human robotics interaction community tend to think that the embodied nature of robots makes them different from, for instance, just CGI representations in video game, or perhaps just thoughts in your head.

[00:11:52] **Christoph:** Interestingly, they started the transition from inanimate dolls to animated robots with the head and not with the genitals. They started with giving their sex robots a voice and behavior. Their robots are being accompanied with a phone app that hosts a virtual embodied agent. The goal is to form relationships with the user . Elena Hancock worked for a research for a long time along human sex workers. And it does not surprise her that RealBotics has taken this path since sex workers offer a very wide range of services.

[00:12:44] **Eleanor:** It shows that we underestimate sex workers in society. You know what I mean? And I think that you see a lot, all the time in narratives political feminist. We'll speak about sex workers as if they're objects, they are just there to be used. And actually a lot of the narratives in campaign against sex robots, there were comparisons made between robots and prostitutes and

the same, oh a prostitute has to do whatever you want in the same way sex robot would, but what do you know along, arguments along those lines, et cetera.

[00:13:11] But for me, those arguments totally overlook what a sex worker is. If you speak to sex workers, I've spent, a lot of years, research sex workers working with them. They, they all, anything from a counselor to an act, an activist, to some extent, they perform a whole host of roles with their clients.

[00:13:28] And I think to assume that a robot could overtake this just overtake that role, sex workers will always have the edge on robots because they've been doing it for a very long time. And I think that the cognitive capabilities of sex workers are extremely profound. And I think that it would be very difficult to train an AI, to do the job of a sex robot.

[00:13:54] Like for example, what about some people really like to take drugs with a sex worker? They want to get an escort over, take drugs with her, have a drink with her, the things you can, you can't do with a robot that you can only do with a human sex worker.

[00:14:09] **Christoph:** While the robots will struggle to be able to perform all the services that normally are expected of human sex workers, Kathleen Richardson are good for complete ban on sex robots since it would degrade women. She started the campaign against sex robots. History will show whether a radical views will gain traction.

[00:14:34] **Eleanor:** My issue is that once we talk about an outright ban we totally breed over actual practical recommendations we can make for sex dolls and sex robots who mended in the sex industry, which is inevitable. It's an inevitability because it's already happening.

[00:14:48] **Christoph:** Are there attempts to regulate the private entertainment life of the people such as through a prohibition were previously unsuccessful, which does not mean that legislators are not already trying. In 2018, the Houston City Council made headlines by enacting an ordinance to ban the operation of what would have been America's first robot brothel.

[00:15:17] **Eleanor:** There's already been a wild scale adoption of sex dolls. I've been that's been ongoing for some time. Obviously we've had two incidents of sexual brothels that have opened in the UK in recent years. And obviously

there's been quite a few examples. Yeah. All around Europe, there was LumiDolls in Barcelona.

[00:15:33] There was one in Paris and there was one in Dublin. So to some extent, these small grassroots examples of sex dolls have already been percolating without any real examples of harm in society.

[00:15:47] **Christoph:** There's so much talk about sex robots in particularly around their morality. It is time that we compliment these theoretical debates with solid empirical studies. Many HRI researchers are likely to shy away from this topic since it could be perceived as controversial. Others may shy away from the media attention it might generate. No topic should be excluded from science and we desperately need to better understand what impact artificial intimate relationships will have on our society.

[00:16:26] Not necessarily to improve the experience of pleasure, but to prevent potential negative side effects such as loneliness. Our situation has several similarities to the race of violent computer games.

[00:16:42] While the popularity has increased dramatically. We are still trying to understand if and what impact they might have.

[00:16:51] **Rob:** So clearly not everybod who plays a first person shooter video game and enjoys playing it goes out and commits a murder. And indeed, it's quite hard to, turns out to be quite hard to show it on a sort of social level. That for instance, the introduction of first person shooter video games into popular culture had any impact on the rights of violence. So there's lots of people in say cultural studies, game studies who say, look people can clearly distinguish between fantasy and reality and their enjoyment of fantasy has no implications for their behavior. On the other hand, it's a, at one level. It's very straightforward books changed the way people behave.

[00:17:39] Think about I dunno, sort of declaration of independence or John Stuart Mill's On Liberty. There are. The media we consume does does shape us. And it seems massively implausible to think that it can't shape us in ways that we might regret. Again, the advertising industry is premised on the idea that if you can get people to associate the sort of fantasy of a product with pleasure, then you can get people to buy the product, which is, which is to say that representation shapes shapes behavior. So I think that if you are getting

people to experience orgasm, while enjoying a particular source of fantasy. That's more likely to make them want to act out that fantasy.

[00:18:26] But I would say it's quite hard to convince most people most people don't want to give up their porn. They don't want to give up their first person shooter video games and they resist the idea that this has any impact on them which is why in my work. I've been interested in what it might say about us or what it might express when we indulge in certain sorts of interactions with media or representations.

[00:18:54] So I have deliberately stayed away from the causal claim. But I would notice that if you claim that these things might have a therapeutic role in the way that you suggested that we can reduce the rate of rape by giving people who might otherwise rape sex robots in which they can enact their their fantasies with which they can enact their fantasies.

[00:19:17] And if you think that's going to lower the rate of rape, you are committed to a claim that AI fantasy. At least with these robots will shape our behavior. And it does seem to me that it's pretty implausible to think that people would only, you know, pave the way we want as a result of interactions with these things.

[00:19:35] If you think that they can make the fantasize behavior less likely you also need to consider the possibility that it would make the fantasized behavior more attractive and therefore more likely.

[00:19:47] **Eleanor:** But obviously I think what we found is that it's very hard to get the balance between fun and the one that might purchase a sex doll or a sex robot just for their own, hedonistic goals. And then obviously how they might actually be marketed and produced and put forward on the internet and online, if they are put forward in a way that illustrates that you can perhaps practice out violent fantasies.

[00:20:12] It's I think that is dangerous, but I obviously think in terms of. So some of the current examples of sex dolls right now, I wouldn't say that they pose any risk to society. We make the point that until we have solid evidence, that there is, that there would be medical benefit from using such dolls that they shouldn't be advertised and marketed in such a way.

[00:20:36] **Christoph:** We have the chance to investigate sex robots before they become widely spread. Let's not miss this rare opportunity.

[00:20:45] **Eleanor:** I think obviously Noel Sharkey's proposition within the report is that it's a lot easier to prevent the implication, the negative implications of technology before they become widely adopted by the whole of society.

[00:20:58] **Christoph:** Thank you for listening to the Human-Robot Interaction podcast.