Cultural Daily

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Maniac: Love in the Age of Robots

Dan Matthews · Wednesday, October 10th, 2018

I just started watching the Netflix series *Maniac*, starring Emma Stone and Jonah Hill. It was directed by Cary Joji Fukunaga, who also directed the first season of *True Detective*, and created by Patrick Somerville. Don't worry, I haven't gotten that far into it, so I'm not going to spoil it for you. Here's the premise: in a dystopian future that looks like the 80s — except for the fact that there are little robots rolling around cleaning up dog poop — there's a company that claims it can basically reprogram your brain.

Stone and Hill are brilliant in this sometimes comedic, mostly dramatic series. Besides the acting, I'm particularly interested in the treatment these two undergo. The company in question is a hybrid pharma/tech company. It's not far from how pharma companies are now, with their biotech experiments and advanced analytics.

The pharma company is conducting trials of a drug. While people are on the drug, a "sophisticated mega-computer" uses artificial intelligence to read their brains. It identifies their problem, maps the workings of their brain, and then "confronts" the problem by creating new neural pathways with microwaves.

When you're first introduced to the artificially intelligent mega-computer, one of the doctors is reading it a poem. In a dreamy female voice, the computer tells the doctor she "loves" the poem and then the doctor caresses the computer's keys. He's obviously in love with the computer.

There's also the possibility that any of the participants in the trial could end up falling in love because of AI therapy, or at least their brains could be reprogrammed so that they can get past their trauma and forge new relationships with other people.

It strikes me that the people behind *Maniac* may not be far off with this show. I recently read a *Guardian* article, "Love in the time of AI: meet the people falling for scripted robots." There are people "falling in love" with characters in sim video games, such as *Mystic Messenger*, a game where you get to know and develop "relationships" with anime characters who are putting together a charity event.

Another such game is *Love and the Producer*, which, according to columnist Oscar Schwartz, "Released an ad that portrayed a young woman telling her mother that she had finally found a husband, but that the husband was a character in the game."

These sim games aren't using AI, but there's a company called SpiritAI working on algorithms that

will allow robots to communicate with you and learn from you — maybe even fall in love with you, and vice versa.

Machines and the pseudo-human characters generated by electricity flowing through their circuits … this isn't exactly love, is it? Who's to say?

This is a trend that has escaped me, but people are increasingly using computers to either fall in love with robots or to fall in love with each other. "Today, more and more people are finding connections and building relationships through gaming," writes Sandra Grauschopf, a freelancer who connected with a man via a text-based, online multiplayer role-playing game. The guy is from Germany, but that didn't stop Sandra from meeting with him. They fell in love and she moved to Germany. Her argument is that online games can be great matchmakers because they allow people to meet others who share their love of gaming. As far as we know, it's a happily-ever-after story for Sandra because of a role-playing game.

Others aren't as lucky as Sandra. On Tinder, people search for meaningful relationships but often come up short because many people on there are just looking to hook up. Then there's Bumble, a dating app that tries to turn the tables by requiring women to make the first move. That way, the assumption goes, the connection won't necessarily be sex-based, it will be one where the woman sets up the meeting based on other factors, such as shared interests.

On a site called Black Love, where black people share stories of their experiences, a woman named Brook Sitgraves Turner shares her online dating experience on Bumble. "My plethora of dating-app matches felt like bots. Regardless of their photograph, alma mater, or profession, these details gave little insight into the human on the other end of this digital exchange… Nothing felt authentic. So, I deleted the app."

Interesting how people came off as bots because she met them on a dating app. Perhaps the app made them think more transactionally about the experience — almost as if dating apps turn dating into a formula instead of something organic. When algorithms make you act, do you act more like an algorithm?

In the Netflix series *Maniac*, my take about the message so far is that robot-facilitated love can have harmful, unexpected consequences. Humans are still going to be irrational no matter what. Maybe that's why people are falling for scripted robots in sim games. When it's just a bot, none of the insecurity and uncertainty that can come with loving a human enters the picture.

Image: Edgarodriguezmunoz via Wikimedia

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