

# Talking with a machine might bring you the joy you're missing

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Ray Kurzweil believes that immortality is attainable. Until he can find a solution to the problem of death, he sticks to a strict daily regimen of alkaline water, green tea and an assortment of 250 supplements. Kurzweil, an American inventor who has been called Edison's rightful heir, believes that nanobots, artificial intelligence at a molecular level, can be used to police our cells for disease and irregularities and improve and extend our lifespan.

His relationship with technology is intimate and intense, an embodiment of his core belief in a future where we will no longer merely cohabit with machines. In what he calls Singularity, human and machine become one, biological and artificial intelligence are fused together and humanity, in a "rupture of human history" transcends biology. For many this dystopian vision is frightening. The unpleasant and usually dysfunctional experience of talking with a machine through a machine while having a telephonic "conversation" with a pre-recorded voice is enough for most of us to want to resist this kind of change. Citing his Law of Accelerating Returns, Kurzweil claims that this revolution is inevitable: technology will advance exponentially, 2 000 times faster this century than the last, whether we like it or not. Our increasing dependence on machines, for both practical help and emotional affirmation, can be a little confusing. The virtual space seems to encourage humans to communicate with one another across geographic and cultural borders. People are seeking out like-minded individuals, sharing knowledge, thought and experience on an unprecedented level.

At this year's TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) conference, Katherine Fulton, a philanthropy expert remarked: "There is a new moral hunger that is growing." The resurgence of the hippie ideals of the 60's — sharing, giving, caring — is supported by the way the web works. Bandwidth and computer memory simply function more efficiently when machines work together, collectively downloading life's joys and burdens. The web offers so many choices that it follows that the most popular ones are the free ones. Here the economy is measured in attention and the currency is clicks. Free stuff gets more clicks.

The irony is in the process. This new-found folksiness would be impossible without machines, which by definition lack human spirit and emotion. Although we might feel that we are connecting with one another, much of the actual time that we humans spend online is spent communing with machines masquerading as humans rather than with flesh and blood.

Before you can make friends on a social networking site or say your bit in a blog, you have to undergo a process of registration and approval. In the real world this kind of protocol is initiated and overseen by humans. Not so online. Your application for online approval is scrutinised by virtual robots that automatically email you with messages of congratulations once you have signed up. Their gushings are so convincing that you might even find yourself experiencing feelings of guilt at not signing in or visiting regularly.

Spamming masterminds use zombie machines to send out those nasty little messages about increasing your the size of your manhood to your inbox. Technological evolution is marked even here. The messages mimic humanness; the senders seem familiar, designed to dupe us into thinking they come from someone we know and trust. Machines spew out random strings of human language designed to fool spam- recognition machines into thinking they come from a human source.

In the midst of all this we humans still struggle with the emotions that set us apart from their machinations. Is it possible that love will some day be measured in clicks?