

How to Turn On a Robot

By INGRID NORTON

A man decides whether to purchase a sexbot that can say no. A female robot visits a psychiatrist to cope with an abusive human partner. A traveler stops for directions and wonders afterward if she spoke to a robot or a human.

According to presentations at the First International Conference on Human-Robot Personal Relationships, such scenarios aren't far off. This month academics from around the world met at the University of Maastricht, in the Netherlands, to discuss a not-so-distant future when robots care for the elderly, participate in the military, and are used as sex partners. One speaker gave her talk from California via a robot-mounted view screen.

The conference was organized by David Levy, author of *Love and Sex With Robots*. In about 40 years, Levy expects artificial intelligence to have progressed to the point where human-robot dating will be commonplace.

"Being loved by a robot?" Levy says. "It sounds a bit weird, but someday, for many, many people, being in love with a robot will be just as good as love with a human."

Conference attendees grappled with other issues of a complicated, roboticized future: Will having perfect, compliant robots make us less patient with vexing human relationships? Will using female robots for cleaning promote gender stereotypes? If you force your robot to have sex with you, is it rape?

Ron Arkin, a professor of computing at the Georgia Institute of Technology who participated in the conference, says the questions aren't spurious. Just as pornography provided incentive for the development of videorecording and the Internet, Arkin says, sex will drive robotic developments. "It's gonna be here before we know it," he says. "If the questions aren't asked, the technology will just show up on your doorstep."

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Volume 54, Issue 42, Page A7