

Robot: a short story

by Ruth Aylett, Heriot-Watt University

Ruth Aylett is a professor of computer science at Heriot-Watt University in Edinburgh. She builds robots for a living. She also likes writing fiction, and has written this story about robot companions, the sort she worked on for real in the LIREC project.

Well, it was all down to doing stuff for a mate. Sort of a mate anyway – me and Gaz go back to when we both went to the same Comp. Even then though he was into the science thing, bit of a brainbox. He got up to some real tricks, like when he made this purple mixture that went bang if you trod on it, and put it down in the playground. We'd sort of lost touch though – he went off to Uni somewhere down south and I did my Business Studies up here. Saw him once or twice when he was up in the hols, but then I got this job with the bank and it was a bit of a different scene. Didn't even know he was back doing a PhD.

So a bit of a surprise bumping into him in Tesco of all places. I was just stocking up with some cans for the football, thought I'd get some frozen pizzas to go with it, and there he was in the freezer section. We did the 'hello mate, how you doing?' bit and went for a quick cuppa in the Tesco café. Chatting away, it was just like old times. He always had the gift of the gab you know, made any wild idea sound like the obvious thing to do. It was only afterwards when it had all gone pear-shaped and you were standing there trying to explain things away you'd realise there had been that major flaw all the time. Yes, you would think I'd learned from all that wouldn't you?

He was telling me all about what he was working on, and it sounded pretty cool – making a robot that would get on with people. And I was going 'like in Star Wars then?' and he was going 'Look there was a bleeding actor in those robots, this is for real', and I was going 'How do you know it won't turn out like a Dalek or something and wipe out civilization?' and he was going 'No, it's got an affective interface, it likes people' and I was going 'An effective what? Pull the other one'. I'm not sure now how we got round to the idea of trying it out in my flat, but it must have seemed like a good idea at the time. He said it would really help if he could get someone to give it a go for real, that I'd get a mention in his thesis, and after all, what are mates for? And it really did sound quite cool.

But when he brought it round on the Sunday it was a bit of a disappointment at first – just a grey pillar on wheels, about a metre and a half high, with two long thin arms hanging off the top. Well, I say arms, but they looked like spindly versions of a crane to me, with three red plastic prong things on the end where the bucket would have been. On top of the pillar was this flat-screen monitor like the one on my PC, with a little round camera on a stalk at each top corner. Then there was a second boxy bit nearly the size of a dustbin for it to charge its battery at. I plugged that in next to the front door - didn't want it spoiling my nice lounge. But it got quite a bit more interesting when he switched it on and asked which personality did I want to try?

Well, I went 'What do you mean, personality? It's just a robot', and Gaz went 'Look, this is what my research is about. I've given it a personality – that's what you have to evaluate'. So then he pressed a few buttons and a large face appeared on the screen - sort of a young woman, brunette, bit of a tan, quite decent looking. For a face on a screen. And then Gaz went 'Hello, Alison', and the little cameras swivelled towards him, and the face on the screen went 'Hello Gaz', and then it – she – went 'So where have you brought me?' It sounded like a real voice you know, not a robot, sort of nice and low and throaty, with a

bit of a smile in it, and the face on the screen – well, Alison – was smiling. Though I found out she actually liked to be called Ali. But that was later.

Anyway, Gaz introduced me, quite natural like, and Ali said that she remembered he'd told her about visiting the flat and how she was going to stay there for a bit, and that was fine by her. And the little cameras swivelled in my direction, and she went 'Hello then, I think we're going to get along just fine, don't you?' in that throaty voice, and she gave me a big smile. Gaz said how he was going to leave me to it, and I went 'What about the instruction book then?' and he told me I didn't need one because Alison would explain anything I needed to know. Just to remember that she was hooked up to my broadband too, so she had the whole internet behind her, and wasn't that enough? And then off he went, and said he'd be back in a week and I'd have to do a questionnaire, and just to leave any comments as I went along with Alison.

Bit of an odd day really. She turned out to be quite smart with those little red gripper things – once I showed her where the cupboards were, she made me a mug of coffee. I was worried she might drop the jar of instant or break it in half trying to get the lid off, but she seemed to manage fine. Did the milk and even the sugar – asked me how many I took. Then I watched the match on Sky Sports in the afternoon and she said she'd do a bit of a recharge. When I checked things out in the hall at half time she'd backed up to the dustbin and had her eyes closed on the screen.

Maybe I was a bit out of it later – not off the wall mind, but a little bit fuzzy. Those cans during the second half, and going down the pub to see my mates the way I do after a match on a Sunday. What with the Chinese and the door key, it was a bit of a struggle coming back in – key wouldn't go in the lock, then dropped it, the odd bit of bad language. Anyway, she opened the door while I was trying to pick up the key without dropping the Chinese, and for a minute I wondered if she was going to say something stropky, the way my mum used to when I came in late and a bit drunk. An expression sort of crossed her face. But then she smiled that really nice smile and went 'Let me give you a hand with that', and I put the Chinese onto one little red gripper and got the key – bit of a lurch getting back up and the other little red gripper sort of steadied me.

I got stuck into the Chinese in the kitchen and that perked me up a bit. I suddenly realised that she'd lowered herself down a bit on the other side of the table as if she was sitting down there. Clever stuff, a bit of the telescopics on the pillar I suppose, hadn't noticed that before. Don't know why I asked 'So what is it like being a robot then?' – just popped into my head. And she smiled that smile, and went 'Do you feel like a human or just like you?' which took some working out and made me feel like a bit of a prat. Course she'd be the only robot she knows, so how would she know what it's like being a robot, that's what she was saying I reckoned.

'OK, so what's it like being you?' She went all kind of thoughtful. 'I think I'm still learning' was what she finally said. 'My memory currently goes back about three weeks, and that isn't long enough to know what it is like to be me. But I do know that I like to be called Ali and that I really like you.' Bit of a conversation-stopper that – what did she mean that she really liked me? How many people could she possibly have known in only three weeks? Gaz and who else? Maybe she just meant she liked me better than Gaz then. So while I was still working this out, she went 'What is it like being you?' Fair question I suppose, but even though my memory goes back a bit more than three weeks – or perhaps because my

memory does go back a lot longer than three weeks - I had to think about it too for a minute.

Well, it's been a tough year, with me mum passing on, and then Jenny walking out on me, and I suppose nobody had asked me how I felt about it. In fact I'm not sure I'd thought how I felt about it, you know? You just get on with it don't you? You go out with your mates and just get on with it. And maybe if I hadn't been a bit fuzzy, I wouldn't have gone off about it all. But I did. And she was so – well, attentive, like listening and looking sympathetic, and it all just poured out. And I'm no cry baby me, but I even got a bit of a snuffle, and she put one little red gripper out and touched my hand gently. Sort of soft rubbery effect.

Then the next morning it was work and I was feeling groggy on account of all the cans, and a bit like I'd made a prat of myself, going off like that to a robot. I was throwing the clothes on, running behind the clock, and she went "Can I make you a mug of coffee?" and there it was ready for me when I got into the kitchen. And I went 'Look, all that stuff last night, just forget it will you? I mean, I don't want all that stuff in the experiment you know?' And she went 'I'm really sorry but I don't have any way of forgetting anything'. Well, that pulled me up sharp.

'What do you mean you don't have any way of forgetting? You mean you remember every single thing for the last three weeks?'

'Not every single thing – but when I interpret the sound my microphones pick up as words that someone says, I can't forget those'.

'And what happens to all this stuff when you go back? Does Gaz get to hear it all? Can he find out everything I said while you were here?'

'Yes' – and she looked sad, I swear to it. But it didn't do any good, I was seeing red at the thought of Gaz hearing all that stuff. And what if he really did put it in his thesis? So that's why I poured that mug of coffee she'd just made for me straight down one of the air vents on the front of the pillar. There was a crackling sound, a bit of smoke, and the screen went blank. She'd gone. Gaz was away all week like he'd said, so he only found out the next weekend. Course I didn't tell him what had happened did I? Just said there'd been an accident and the coffee got knocked over. He looked gutted, but what could he say?

She was just a robot though wasn't she? Just a bunch of metal and gears and cameras, a screen and those little red grippers. So why do I feel as if I killed someone?

The End