There are several ways in which technologies can be applied to one’s daily life to save time for more important things. These include better management of your digital documents and reducing the time to access them. It is important to examine things you do repeatedly and figure out if there are ways to do the tasks more efficiently. Also, it is equally important to avoid wasting time with lost files and hacked accounts. Foresight, planning, and use of new digital applications will ease your burden and avoid catastrophic losses.

Many of us spend time accessing information on the Internet. You might be surprised how many extra key strokes or screens you go through to get to an online location you want. While routinely I will access about twenty websites, I like to have quick access to well over fifty so that with a single point and click I have arrived at the webpage. I use this method on my computer, tablet, and phone. The alternative, leaving multiple tabs open in a web browser, is not only inefficient, but less secure than the solution below.

First, I have set my browser to automatically open two webpages. Any browser can be configured to save a set of “homepages.” One webpage is for LastPass, which is discussed below, and the other is a webpage with links to frequently used webpages. My webpage is properly configured so that with one quick click I can access multiple email accounts, a calendar, social media, “My TU;” the undergraduate catalog, Blackboard, SharePoint, Cockeysville community library, the TU Cook Library, the TU academic calendar, a fitness center, multiple news sites, weather, online banking, etc. No passwords, however, are stored on this webpage in case someone else gains access. Anyone at Towson University can create a webpage such as this through WordPress. The little bit of effort it takes to create your personal “quick links” site will save time over the year and create greater security.

The way to keep your email, Facebook, and financial accounts safe is to have unique long and unmemorable passwords for each. If one password is stolen, then the other websites are still secure. However, remembering many long and difficult passwords (such as A4mv&93*shen32-Ym) is near impossible. I make use of LastPass, which just requires a single master password. This software that securely stores and later fills in the passwords for websites when you log onto the sites. Currently this software is free for use on a single device. For use on multiple devices and all functions, however, the dollar or so a month fee is well worth it. I have the LastPass application loaded on my computer, tablet, and smart phone. There are other excellent commercial alternatives as well. All of these password storage sites will allow you to quickly change your passwords, something that is recommended everyone do every month or so.

Consider what would happen with your documents, pictures, and other digital items with a power surge, theft, fire, ransomware, etc. Technology can be employed to archive and backup your work and personal items. Adopting the “rule of 2” means that all of your documents, an original file and a copy, are backed up in different locations. There are free and paid services that will do this for you automatically and save work on the “Cloud.” If your files are small and just contain Word and Excel documents, for instance, you could manually save the backup files on Dropbox, Google Drive, or Microsoft OneDrive. Thumb drives or larger external drives are another option if you work with large files such as video. Whatever your choice, however, make sure that every digital item is saved in at least two locations. The time you have taken to create them is too valuable.

Having safely secured your documents is one issue, however, being able to retrieve them later is another. Consider filenames that are descriptive and that you will remember later. It is also a best practice to repeatedly save your files with different file names while you are working on them. Make sure each file name is unique! For instance, you might save a file with the date at the end or a number: filename_1, filename_2, filename_3, etc. Save documents with the new files names at least every 30 minutes. You will be thankful, if you have a power outage and lose your current work. Also, sometimes when working on files you might change them radically or the file gets corrupted. Having earlier versions of the document will mean you don’t need to start over again. Digital storage now is very cheap. Your time is not! There is not a problem with having 20 backup files, it is a disaster, however, having none.

For on-screen demonstrations please visit: Personal Efficiencies video
Welcome to this academic year that will feature the College of Fine Arts & Communication (COFAC) theme “Drones and Droids.” Over this year the College will provide artistic explorations and commentaries on the theme of technology. We will explore topics from a world in which cars drive themselves, drones deliver goods, and computer algorithms are replacing human workers. The COFAC theme is timed to coincide with the 2019 setting of the Sci-Fi classic Blade Runner (1982). This year also marks the 200th anniversary of Mary Shelley’s famous novel Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus. 

There are several COFAC events presenting the theme this semester: The Fall concert season for the Department of Music will open on September 16 with the TU Brass Quintet under the title “Ancient Calls: Time and Space.” Also launching early in September are podcasts hosted by Adam Schwartz, EMF faculty member, devoted to discussions of technology. The Department of Electronic Media and Film is further supporting the theme with the film series “Drones and Droids: Cyborg Sex” hosted by Professors, Kalima Young and Michael Angelakia. There will be many other items as well adding to the collective commentary. If you come away from these COFAC events inspired or disturbed, pondering or perplexed, informed and bemused, then we will have accomplished our artistic goals.

Dr. Terry B. Ewell, Professor & Graduate Coordinator for the Department of Music, is the theme scholar for the 2018-19 academic year. Check out more essays, interviews, and podcasts online at www.towson.edu/cofac.

MACHINES THAT FAKE IT

By Terry B. Ewell

Mechanical or synthetic replications of humans have been a favorite subject of science-fiction books, movies, and television for over one hundred years. In these fantasies of future life, the quasi-people serve and aid humans. In certain stories the replicants even assume the full roles, rights and relationships as peers to people. Underlying these stories, however, are aspects that are often overlooked. Although crafted as explorations about robots, androids, droids, or cyborgs, they also express the search for the essence of humanity—its aspirations, hopes, and dreams and whether Homo sapiens are distinctive and will remain so.

One science fiction author stands out among the numerous writers for his visionary conception of synthetic persons and the moral and sociological implications they bring. Movies such as I, Robot (2004), which stars Will Smith, Bicentennial Man (1999) with Robin Williams, and the lesser-known Russian film The End of Eternity (1987) were inspired by the writings of Isaac Asimov. Yet these movies only touch upon small portions of his contributions on the subject. Asimov’s “Three Laws of Robotics,” given in his 1942 short story Runaround, is one of the earliest and most influential statements about how robots should interact with people and other robots. Further elaborations of these laws and ideas about human and robot interactions, emotional bonding, and even marriage between a robot and human are creatively explored in the novel The Robots of Dawn and other works.

Asimov’s future world is one where robots can peacefully co-exist with humans and most often it is the humans that form the destructive forces in society. The robots are autonomous agents, constrained by their programming, which function well in future societies.

There are numerous examples of movies and television shows exploring the theme of quasi-humans. The classic movie Metropolis (1927) is famous for the strength of its story line and compelling cinematic presentation. Here the robotic female is portrayed as both seductive and menacing. At other times she is an agent of destruction. In Blade Runner (1982) Rick Deckard is assigned to “retire” four dangerous replicants who cling to life as desperately as any human. After completing that work, however, he escapes with a replicant named Rachel. In the sequel Blade Runner 2049 (2018) the movie reveals that Rachel and Deckard have had a child. This event is all the more unusual because Deckard is probably a replicant himself. The TV series Star Trek: The Next Generation (1987-1994) and subsequent movies follow development of Data, an android that functions as an officer on the crew of the starship Enterprise. Data is treated as a person by the ship’s crew, develops more and more human attributes as the series progresses, and eventually is accorded full human rights—even marriage. The TV series Humans (2015-present) explores in more detail the integration, conflicts, and tribalism between humans and androids (“synths”). Their blood may be blue and their eyes green, but the series presents the androids as often possessing more humane qualities than the red-blooded Homo sapiens in the same stories. Also, worthy of note is Black Mirror, which features a collection of distinct episodes about technology. The fall 2018 film series hosted by EMF (Electronic Media and Film) titled, “Drones and Droids: Cyborg Sex,” will present two episodes from Black Mirror that explore virtual reality, the dream of eternal youth, and The Singularity.

The physical attributes of these quasi-humans are the first challenge to the essence, the ontology (nature of being), of
A last challenge from quasi-humans comes in emotional or social contexts, which were distinguished by Ray Kurzweil in 2011. A machine of Spiritual Machines is oddly titled since it primarily demonstrates the development of computer intelligence and relational abilities with humans.2 Not one statement in the book addresses spirituality: none of the AI programs develop belief in—or experience the presence of—God or gods. However, the book does explore the subject of emotional intelligence in machines. Also, Sherrie Turkle and John Searle advocate that software developers are encoding more and more emotive-like responses into social robots.3 When robots present emotional cues, many people respond as if the robots were alive, as if the AI programs were sentient.

“Anthro-confusion” or “anthro-bending” is finding unique expression today and will figure more prominently in public forums in the future. The French band Daft Punk, a human duo, have been inspired by robots since they were young. Their desire for anonymity compelled them to appear as robots and even provide synthetic sounding voices in some songs. In the USA, the issue of projecting human essence upon inanimate figures is considered such a threat that in June 2018 the House of Representatives unanimously passed a law against the sale of phallic dolls and robots in the USA.4 Other countries have in place or are considering similar bans. The concern is that people who act out their passions with synthetic likenesses of children will eventually seek the same actions with real children. Indiana's Public Instruction and Human Rights Commission now considers the closer a robot resembles a person, for instance, bystanders viewing the assault of a vacuum cleaner display different emotions than those watching the assault of a replica of a person. Ethical issues with these new quasi-humans will occupy public debate for years to come.

If quasi-humans can imitate humans in physical appearance and function with intellectual and emotional responses, then will there be nothing that distinguishes androids from humans? How will they treat the difference between the two sexes? It does not matter whether androids are human within natural human language.5 Watson has since gone on to successful careers predicting the weather, analyzing customer data, supporting health care decisions, and even serving as a teaching assistant in education.

A century ago, humans only needed to ponder how many distinct human features are needed to sustain life often had to do with physical attributes of Homo sapiens, such as the opposable thumb, the ability to make tools, or the human reproductive system.6 The intellectual attributes of these quasi-humans are the second manifestation of this question. Ray Kurzweil famously stated in 2005 that “In the digital ground.” In contemporary terms we might state that the bones, tissues, and DNA were all in place. The mere assemblage of the materials, however, did not result in human life. Only after the bones, tissues, and DNA were all in place and able to function with intellectual and emotional responses, then only could an organism become a living thing. (Genesis 2:7, New King James Version)

The Jews are generally accepted, that a frail, it must not know a human being is, from which reason, shall allow being in order to come by any. A man that does so, unless given by the human beings to be a man, and he can not be said to have a soul. (Acts 17:28, NKJV)

The Robots of Dawn

The Robots of Dawn

The Robots of Dawn

The Robots of Dawn

The Robots of Dawn

Thus, appearing to be human is not the same as becoming human. Quasi-humans that fake it are just that, only reproductions, only imitations.

This, however, does not remove people of faith from a dilemma unique to their vantage point. While intellectually they might understand that quasi-humans do not have the transcendental qualities necessary to be human, the emotional cues provided by social robots invoke responses as if they were living. Sherrie Turkle poignantly writes:

“…in Him (God) we live and move and have our being.” Words from Jesus, Matthew 4:4, NKJV. This is a quotation from the Hebrew Bible, Deuteronomy 4:31, which states: “When you come to inherit the land which the Lord your God is giving you, you shall possess it and live in it. For the land which you are going to cross and inherit…is not like the land of Egypt from which you came, where you sowed your seed and watered it with your foot, as you watered your vineyards.” (Deuteronomy 11:10–11, NKJV)

Words from Paul, also known as Saul of Tarsus, Acts 17:28, NKJV. For people of faith, however, the quasi-human dilemma appears differently. Materialists such as Ray Kurzweil look to the day where the digital duplication of all synapses in the human brain, sees the possibility for replication of all life if the components of life can be properly assembled. Thus, life is a complex process of consciousness. “Once you have the organized function of the stomach is to real digestive processes, if there is nothing that distinguishes androids from humans?” (1953), p. 61/15 (October 9, 2014), p. 54.


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