

Fictional Human and Real Robot, as seen by an ordinary participant

Last November I went to see the event at Sheffield Hallam University, named 'Fictional Human and Real Robot: Sharing Spaces with Robots'. The event was taking place on the 19th and 20th and 23rd of November. Despite being among the supporters of this event, I went to experience it as an ordinary participant, taking my son along with me on Sunday morning, because he loves robots and it seemed like an amazing place to be at a weekend, since together with robots, the organisers promised tea, coffee and cakes!

We were not disappointed, that is for sure! True, we started our adventure with buying a very appealing chocolate cake (for my son), and some latte (for me) at the café right opposite the room with the robots. This was a small mistake on our part, since as soon as we entered the room where the robots were on display, we forgot about our purchases, and found them only 2 hours later, still standing on a table where we put them as our attention went immediately towards the robots.

The first robot to greet us was robot Pepper, a truly amazing creature, which (or it is 'who'?) can walk, dance, sing, talk and even answer some questions! On my question whether Pepper can speak any French, he said that he doesn't speak it, and neither does he know any Russian. Pepper is also very clever; as it clearly avoids answering direct questions about his age, saying that he was born in 2013 but does not remember the exact day (should be the other way around, Pepper!).

Next to Pepper was robot Emma (also known as Betty), a unique project being developed by PhD students at the Centre for Automation and Robotics Research at Sheffield Hallam. The robot, based on software development can say very smart things, including wishing you a 'Merry Christmas' a month ahead of the actual event, which is very appropriate since we are in the UK and as we all know very well, we, in Britain, do like starting to prepare for Christmas early. When you say, 'thank you' to Emma, it replies 'you are welcome', which is in line of being very polite. One thing the PhD students should still teach Emma, in my humble opinion, is how to say 'sorry' every five minutes, for no particular reason.

Another robot, currently 'nicknamed' as Green (because it is clearly quite green) was standing silently but remarkably next to Emma, reminding me of that movie the 'Ex-Machina'. This was especially striking as my next step was to plunge into the virtual reality developed by the Arts and Design Centre at Sheffield Hallam University, and in which I stayed for quite a while, being forced out only because there was a queue forming next to me, trying to get the same experience. I did not

even know it was possible! You put a helmet on and while physically you still stay in the same room, your mind and vision go somewhere totally different! In this case, I actually could visit an exhibition on robots, showing me some posters from the event, but also something, which was not present at all, or was present, but in virtual reality! I was visiting a virtual reality museum, something I would definitely want to do again, especially if for some reason I cannot leave my house but still want to see and experience things! This is something that many people could benefit from in the future, I think.

While my son was entertained by the researchers, and by an improvised babysitter, I attended a script-writing workshop running for two hours on both Saturday and Sunday, with real acting and filming! This was one of the funniest and creative experiences for me, personally, and I was especially glad when I received as assignment for my script 'Marrying a Robot'. Whilst the theme of Russian bride did come into my mind immediately (since I am originally from Russia), I did hesitate for a couple of seconds about the name for my robot, and taking into account some interesting things happening politically in the UK and in Europe, I gave him a name starting with the letter 'F' and sounded like French.

The next Wednesday evening we could again see and interact with robots and watch the movie that the filmmakers made based on our scripts. I have to say that I was impressed by what they could do in terms on editing in only two days (and yes, they did not even sleep apparently). My marriage to the robot 'F' was among the funniest bits (since I am very modest, I just have to say it), but other scripts were hilarious, thought provoking and hugely entertaining as well. Everyone in the audience was having fun while watching the movie. We then all went for a small discussion on robots, while having drinks and canapés.

Yes, at Sheffield Hallam University they do know how to entertain the public and make it interested in some very serious research at the same time!

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