Are Child Sex-Robots Inevitable?

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Promo from the TV show Battlestar Galactica. Spoiler: the show features a good amount of robot-human sex

With every new technology comes a way to use that technology for sex. Porn dominated the early Internet. Smartphones became the mailing service for scandalous selfies. Google Glass has already been used to make (and watch) an immersive XXX film starring that James Deen. So, it’s not surprising that when academics get together to talk about robots, their potential erotic use comes up. Rosie won’t just be doing the Jetsons’ housework, wrote a business professor and a futurist a couple years back, she’ll be working the corner as a robot prostitute. They argued robot sex workers would eliminate human exploitation, ensure a disease-free experience (as long as the robots were hosed down after), and could be enjoyed in places where prostitution is illegal. It may sound weird, but think about the intimate relationship you have with your iPhone. You’ve taken it to bed multiple times already; imagine if Siri could actually massage you.
“We’ve had sex toys for as long as mankind, and womankind, have been around,” said Ron Arkin, Georgia Tech’s Mobile Robot Lab director, while speaking on a robot ethics panel at Berkeley on Friday. “But how will we deal with robot intimacy? Will we consider it beastiality? Could we use it to treat sex offenders?” Once we start creating sex-robots, what will be the limits we put on them? It’s not a human being so you should theoretically be able to rock your human-like Rumba however you want, but there may be some situations that create moral panics even if the Cylon-victim involved is just a bundle of algorithms and plastic. I asked the panel how society would deal ethically and legally with a hypothetical company that starts producing child sex-robots to satisfy deviant sexual desires.

Arkin said that while he doesn’t approve of child sex bots for recreational use, he’d like to see them used for research purposes. “Child-like robots could be used for pedophiles the way methadone is used to treat drug addicts,” said Arkin. He said research should be done to test the effectiveness of such a treatment. “There are no presumptions that this will assuredly yield positive results – I only believe it is worth investigating in a controlled way to possibly provide better protection to society from recidivism in sex offenders,” he said. “If we can save some children, I think it’s a worthwhile project.”

He added that he did worry about the possible creation of a black market that would offer the robots outside of a clinical setting. This isn’t the first time Arkin has broached the indelicate subject. After he made a comment about it in the press years ago, he says he got a call from a clinician who works with sex offenders who wanted to do the research. However, prepubescent sex bots don’t exist yet (at least that we know about). There are bot-like babies: People in the “reborner movement” buy incredibly human-looking baby dolls for as
much as $4,000 — sometimes outfitted with heartbeats and chests that rise and fall — though they want the babies to protect and nurture, not to exploit sexually. If an entrepreneur started up KidSexBots-R-Us, would it be legal?

Ryan Calo, a law professor at the University of Washington, thinks it might be, based on the Supreme Court’s treatment of child pornography. “What appears to be child porn, but isn’t, is not illegal,” said Calo. Making or possessing child pornography results in severe legal penalties; those who watch child porn sometimes get longer sentences than people convicted of actually molesting children. However, in 2002, the Supreme Court drew a line between child porn and “virtual child porn” where the “child” is actually a young-looking adult or a computer-rendered image. It said images that are wholly faked, no matter how realistic they were, are legal. So the law might see sex with a “virtual child” the same way. At least in the U.S.

If you’re a Canadian, the hypothetical KidSexBots-R-Us could get you in trouble. Last year, a 48-year-old Canadian man ordered a 4-foot, 2-inch school-uniform-wearing sex doll made of “foam-like material.” For some reason, it was intercepted and unboxed by Canada Border Services agents at Toronto airport. They arrested the doll fan and charged him with child pornography. According to local media, child sex dolls are illegal in Canada, which doesn’t bode well for child sex bots in the Great White North. The man has pleaded not guilty and faces a trial this month. It will be a test case for virtual sexual freedom.

We likely have quite a few years before an autonomous robot that looks and acts like a child will be on the scene. But I’m sure that many people would be horrified at the idea of that robot being molested and do their best to shut down such a company even if the law embraces it. “It’s a decision for society to make,” said robot expert Noel Sharkey, adding that people could circumvent the question by saying their sex robots were just “short adult robots.”