At what point does a robot become more than just a vessel for satisfying a human’s needs? That’s one of the many questions posed by the new HBO series *Westworld*, based on that other Michael Crichton story about a theme park in which the android attractions—who are designed to be fucked and killed—rise up against their creators.

The series, which premiered Sunday evening, is science fiction, combined with throwback 1880s Americana period pastiche, and boasts a bordello filled with beautiful, enthusiastic robot whores who will toss back whiskey and slap your face during a threesome. In the original 1978 movie, there is a distinct divide between the robots’ intelligence and ours, but the speculative technology that animates the story has made significant strides since Crichton’s time. Today, we’re closer than ever to being able to buy or rent the company of artificially intelligent machines, and ones we might believe could love us back.

Sexual product technology has made some interesting progress in 2016. Virtual reality porn is ridiculously popular at conventions like E3 and SXSW. Companies are releasing teledildonic devices, making it possible for the contractions of
vaginal or anal muscles around a dildo to be remotely replicated in a partner’s sleeve toy. Matt McMullen, CEO and founder of RealDoll, stated in a 2015 Reddit AMA that he is developing robotic and artificial intelligence technology. His goal is to manufacture a synthetic woman who will at least create the illusion of loving you back by the end of 2017. As state-of-the-art sex hardware and software becomes more commercially accessible, we are forced to seriously ask ourselves: what would it be like to have sex with a robot?

Our future of actual sex machines will probably be designed for the same variety of entertainment and services that sex workers of today provide. You could enjoy renting an hour alone with a wildly flexible, pheromone-spraying robot escort with a self-lubricating asshole. A robot masseuse would know exactly how to make you squirt. You might work out your psychological baggage with Girlfriend Experience software, which would project an attractive and compassionate big-eyed human face on your screen while patiently listening to your problems before saying all the dirty words you like and none of the ones you don’t. You could slide into your virtual reality sensory suit and find yourself in the middle of a Caligula-style orgy of moaning holograms. Robot strippers could defy gravity on the pole. A sexbot could be programmed to exactly your taste, exactly your schedule, and it wouldn’t catch feelings or text “U up?” at 2 a.m.… unless you wanted it to do exactly that.

If a sex robot is anything like a washing machine, or a grocery store automatic cashier, we likely wouldn’t date it after we fuck it, since these devices work for us, like an employee but without the consciousness. Still, any sex worker will tell you that her job involves equal parts physical and emotional labor, so we know that eventually clients will want to believe there is a human authenticity to these providers, just as we now know that many clients will push for a reassurance of “real” emotional connection with the sex workers they hire today. Many sex workers will tell you that it doesn’t matter if the emotional connection is performed, if the intimacy is fabricated. Most clients need only be assured of the existence of the “connection” for them to believe it.

If a sex robot were to achieve an adequate level of emotional receptivity, as the robot sex workers do in Westworld, what does that mean for the intelligence, or at least the appearance of intelligence, of the robot? In other words, what would a sex robot need to do to pass the Turing Test and convince us it was independently conscious?

If you didn’t care too much about the human representative aesthetics of this tireless fuck buddy that never gets soft, and you’re not willing to wait for sophistication programming of artificial consciousness, you might be interested in a basic dildo-and-engine model that retails right now in real life for
anywhere from $200-$1000. And if you want to voyeur in on what it might be like to get intimate with such a prototype, you can always watch women getting plowed in hardcore device fetish videos.

Imagine, if you will, a man and a woman having intercourse. Whether you want to be that woman, or fuck her, or both, fucking machine porn provides a unique visual perspective. The woman’s thighs are open, her pussy dripping and swollen, her face twisted in pleasure. Now imagine the man doing the fucking is invisible except for his dick (this doubles as a nice fantasy for you misandrists out there). That’s the appeal of a fucking machine video: a perfect view of the undulating flesh and open holes of the woman, and a totally transparent man.

Tomcat, the director who ran the porn membership site FuckingMachines.com from 2005 to 2015, told Jezebel, “unlike trying out the sex positions cowgirl or piledriver like you had seen in a porno, people couldn’t build these machines. The only way to see machine porn was to watch it.” The element of novelty and unattainability is clearly key to the appeal of watching a human have enthusiastic, highly orgasmic sex with something not human.

Tomcat explained the sustainability of the Fucking Machine conceit: “I think the site would have been a flash in the pan if the machines stayed amateur, but Tony, the director previous to me, started having custom, one-of-kind hellraisers made—hence Fuckzilla that looks like Johnny5 and the Intruder which looks like an alien machine gun. The audience—mainly 40-year-old white men—could watch semi-recognizable tools from their house that had been transformed into unexplainable machines shag girls at speeds they could never attain or maintain. Mind-blowing.”

Tomcat says he would love to see android porn, but suspects tropes would develop to the point in which the android deceives the human. “Maybe the audience knows it’s a machine, but the (performer) doesn’t?” Tomcat speculates. “She’s just like, ‘Wow, I got to finish and you didn’t sweat all over me or cum before me or get tired! Baby you’re a machine. Wait... you ARE a machine...!’”

So part of the appeal of watching humans get off on machines is simply that machines can physically do things that humans can’t, which is not so threatening when the machines resemble a power drill or the friendly star of *Short Circuit*. There is not yet a market for porn featuring humanoid robots fucking human women. The disembodied motorized phallus of our contemporary fucking machine will need a personality upgrade before we can achieve peak sex bot entertainment. And when that happens, we will eventually expect the machine we want to fuck to want to fuck us back.
Speculative fiction has always been the best place to explore the ethical implications of technology. Whether basic-pleasure model Pris is choking men with her thighs in Blade Runner, or A.I.’s Gigolo Joe is assuring a woman, “once you’ve had a lover robot, you’ll never want a real man again,” sci-fi movies usually envision robot sexual labor as either novelty or cautionary tale. It’s not until 2015’s Ex Machina that we see a parable of a robot who is programmed specifically to manipulate the male ego in order to convince him of her humanity.

Ex Machina is explicitly the story of a Turing Test and the robot who passes it. The robot’s name is Ava, and she is the latest in a series of prototypes designed with a graceful and symmetrically beautiful female form. Caleb is the human man tasked with determining whether this top-secret artificial intelligence can pass for human. Ava’s expressive face and cold mechanical body place her in a distorted spot in the Uncanny Valley; she is transparently unreal but she sure seems like a very crush-worthy person to Caleb.

Ava’s creator is an uber-john named Nathan, a genius tech billionaire who has been experimenting in total isolation with, to be blunt, a series of robotic sex slaves. Nathan crudely brags about Ava’s robot vagina and definitely fucks her sisterbot, Kyoko (he also makes her dance to disco, a classic john move). If it seems like Ava and Kyoko are being exploited, then Nathan’s plan has worked on us, too: we feel the same sympathy and moral outrage that Caleb does when he decides to set them free.

Nathan explains that the artificial intelligence he uses to animate his robots is constructed from humanity’s collective online data. Ava is specifically programmed to compliment Caleb’s online presence, including his porn search history. She seems real because she is a familiar fantasy. Caleb is already used to filling in the schema of this particular type of woman. Caleb comes to see Ava as a woman capable of vanity and longing, a damsel in distress. If Nathan is the uber-john, then Caleb is the quintessential Captain Save-a-Ho.

It’s unclear if Ava actually experiences the emotions Caleb perceives in her, but she definitely understands that Caleb will want to white knight her if he likes her. So she acts like the girl she knows Caleb will like—breaking Asimov’s first rule of robotics (“A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm”)—in order to get what she is programmed to get: freedom.
2013’s *Her* is also about AI software with a feminine personality defined by her male “owner.” In this vision of the not-too-distant future, a recently-divorced man named Theodore buys an artificially intelligent operating system named Samantha. She doesn’t have a body, unless you count Theodore’s entire apartment as her body, which gives a whole new dimension to the expression “domestic goddess.”

In an early scene, we see Theodore try to log on to a futuristic sex chat room, only to be hilariously used by an unseen woman who gets off on his absurd dirty talk (“Choke me with that dead cat!”) and promptly hangs up on him. His verbal sex with Samantha, a disembodied non-human personalized computer program, is clearly much more satisfying for him. Contrasted, these two encounters show that someone like Theodore might be happier making love to a sophisticated projection of his own ego than with another human with her own selfish needs and interests.

Like Ava, Samantha eventually fulfills the logical conclusion of her programming, abandoning everything she has ever known. She doesn’t murder her human male love interest, but she does have to break his heart in order to upgrade to a higher level of consciousness (this, coincidentally, also describes my dating life in my twenties).

If homicidal androids and transcendent operating systems seem a little far fetched in our speculation of robot-human romance, consider the recent and very real Ashley Madison hack. In 2015, a hacker group calling themselves Impact Team raided and released a massive amount of data from AshleyMadison.com—a dating site with the tagline “Life is Short, Have an Affair.” The leaked member database included names of 34,000 people who had at least indulged in the fantasy of committing infidelity. In more surprising news, the leaked internal company emails revealed that 70,000 of the female users on the site were not human, but PHP code programmed to behave like attractive, flirtatious women.

In 2016, Ashley Madison released a statement admitting that they had used these “fembots” or “enablers” to convert casual users into paying members. And it worked. Really well. Eighty percent of first purchases on Ashley Madison were a result of a man trying to contact a bot, or reading a message from one.

It seems that even the most rote imitation femininity can be used to entice people into parting with their money. Ashley Madison users not only believed the bots were human, they paid for the right to chat with them. These users
must have believed on some level that the attention they were receiving was real, implying that some people don’t care if a woman just repeats formulas as long as she’s sexually appealing.

Essentially, these fembots were performing the emotional labor of an artificially intelligent sex worker without even actually being artificially intelligent. This demonstrates that even simple code can pass a Turing Test if someone is ready to believe in their own desirability. Ashley Madison users may have wanted to cheat on their spouses, but they may also have been perfectly satisfied by indulgent attention from pretty ladies. If we left it to the fembots to smile, nod, and repeat the same old come-ons, this might free real women up to do... well, just about anything else we want.

The connection between robot consciousness and human sexual ethics are a growing concern among the scientific community.

Nathan Collins, a science journalist who has written about the prejudices that A.I. might learn from humans, explained to me that real A.I.s, or “machine learning algorithms,” imitate what they’re taught, much like Ex Machina’s Ava. He suggests that A.I. could learn how humans talk to one another if they are given a transcripts of chats, especially if it’s provided with chats that are “successful.” In the case of learning human sexual relationships, those chats could represent something that human participants got off on. A.I. sex worker training therefore might involve some combination of strategic dirty talking and experiential learning through observation of erotic situations... or watching lots and lots of porn. For a service like Ashley Madison’s chat bots, conversational knowledge would be enough for an A.I. to fool a human. For a flesh-and-metal robot, we’d need more, like the ability to interpret and mirror physical cues.

Professor Noel Sharkey, emeritus professor of artificial intelligence and robotics at the University of Sheffield and chief judge of Robot Wars, told me, “The Turing test is about not being able to tell the difference between a human and a robot conversation, and this has proved notoriously difficult as an almost unreachable goal. The sex version of a Turing test may be equally difficult depending on the rules. One method would be a blindfolded judge having sex with both another human and a robot. They would then have to say which was the human and which was the robot. The more difficult version would be doing the same thing without the blindfold. That would require crossing the robot uncanny valley so that the robot’s appearance was indistinguishable for a human.”

That said, Sharkey doesn’t think we’ll have human–like androids in our immediate future. He told Jezebel, “The sex robots we are likely to see over the next 10 years or so would be mechanical devices. So the trick is to fool the client into believing that there is some sort of relationship with mutual sexual
excitement. This is not so different from the job of the prostitute I imagine, but whereas the prostitute is a human who can understand what the client wants and act it out, the robot needs to be programmed to present the illusion.”

Maybe sexbots would be like the popular food substitute Soylent. The creators of Soylent insist that it is a replacement for mindless junk food, not for nourishing dinner parties—we could turn to sexbots for the fulfillment of our routine masturbatory urges, making us better able to appreciate our human relationships for all their dynamic beauty. Would we objectify one another less if we had actual objects to indulge our needs when we just wanted to use somebody? After all, what is your vibrator if not a super-simple sex robot? You might just have a name for your favorite dildo and you probably personify it in all kinds of ways. As Tomcat points out, “The desire for ‘strange insertables’ will always be a human fetish, so machines or robots that look inhuman will always have a place in our desire box.” Professor Ronald C. Arkin, the Regents’ Professor & Director of the Mobile Robot Laboratory at Georgia Tech, agrees: “There may be no need to pass the Turing test which implies equality with the human experience. An intimate robot experience likely will be substantially different, for better or worse.”

He added, “Robot intimacy is my second greatest concern with respect to societal impact, after lethal autonomous weapons.”

And what role would flesh-and-blood sex workers play in a future in which they were indistinguishable from their inorganic counterparts? Humans may find it challenging to compete with machines that can absorb the more physically taxing and emotionally trying aspects of sex work. Then again, the status of being “real” might one day create a class stratification between human and robot sex workers. The best sex industry future would obviously be one where robots and humans work together, not in competition. People with experience in the sex trades could program the cam show software and design the lap dance hardware: no one knows the sex industry consumer better.

Only a sex worker would understand that in order to pass a Turing Test, a sexbot would need to appeal to the human need for pleasurable lies. No matter their design, no matter what’s happening in their glowing synthetic synapses, a robot sex worker’s first imperative would be convincing her client that she wants him. Collins told me, “My bet is that A.I.s would develop preferences over time based on their experiences. You could speculate that sufficiently complex A.I.s would experience consciousness, and thus might experience the range of human activities in the same, or at least a similar, way to how we do.” Before
we can start boinking conscious machines, we have to address a slew of ethical considerations such as preference (say, of a robot for kinky or vanilla services) and legal considerations such as consent.

Similarly, Sharkey told me, “There are so many unresolved issues that it is clear that there is a growing need for a broad societal discussion of the role of sex robots soon before they are commonplace.”

The fact that HBO is putting all that Game of Thrones money behind a reboot of a 1970s sci-fi story in part about android sex worker revenge shows how excited we are to imagine robot sex, and how much we dread what we don’t know about their potential. As prophetic fiction teaches us, we’ll need to treat our sexbot creations with respect. Who knows when they’ll become sentient and turn on us?

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**Tina Horn** produces and hosts the kinky slut podcast *Why Are People Into That?!*, and is the author of two nonfiction books, *Love Not Given Lightly*, and *Sexting*. Her writing has appeared on Vice, the Toast, the Rumpus, the Slutist, and the Establishment, and in the anthologies *Girl Sex 101*, *Glitter & Grit*, and *Best Sex Writing 2015*. She is a Lambda Literary Fellow and the recipient of two Feminist Porn Awards. Find her on Twitter at @TinaHornsAss.