

Foreword

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Margaret Morris and I would seem to be on opposite sides of an argument. I am a partisan of conversation. Morris is a maestro of apps. Readers of this book will learn that this is too simple a story. In real life, when you take the time to look closely, we all talk back to technology. Or want to. The most humane technology makes that easy.

That puts a responsibility on designers. And on those of us who bring technology into our everyday lives. To make more humane technology, we have to make it our own in our own way. We can't divide the world into builders and users. Digital culture needs participants, citizens.

So if my plea to those who would build "empathy apps" has always been, "We, people, present, talking with each other, we are the empathy app," both Morris and I would ask, "Well, how can we build technologies that encourage that conversation?"

For many years, I have written about the power of *evocative objects* to provoke self-reflection. But some objects, and by extension, some technologies, are more evocative than others. *Left to Our Own Devices* can be read as a primer for considering what might make for the most evocative technology. And if you suspect you have one in your hand, how might you best use it? You can reframe this question: If you are working with a technology that might close down important conversations, can it be repurposed to open them up?

Indeed, my first encounter with Morris was in June 2005, when she wrote me about a technology that I was already worried about.

The object in question was the robot, Paro, a sociable robot in the shape of a baby seal, designed to be a companion for the elderly. Paro gives the impression of understanding simple expressions of language and emotion.

Foreword to *Left to Our Own Devices* by Margaret E. Morris. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, December 2018.

It recognizes sadness and joy, and makes sounds and gestures that seem emotionally appropriate in return. Its inventor, Takanori Shibata, saw Paro as the perfect companion for the elderly, and so did a lot of other people. After I visited Japan in fall 2004, Shibata gave me three Paros, and I began to work with them in eldercare facilities in Massachusetts. That's what I was doing when I received Morris's first email. She said that she was a clinical psychologist interested in the "health benefits" of Paro. Shibata suggested that she be in touch with me. I look at that December 2005 email now and note my polite response: "Yes, surely, let's talk."

I dreaded the conversation with Morris. I didn't have cheerful things to say to someone working on robots, health apps, and health benefits. The Paro project troubled me. Robots like Paro could pick up on language and tone, and offer pretend empathy to the elderly. But the robot understood nothing of what was said to it. Every day when I went to work, I was asking myself, "What is pretend empathy good for?"

One day my conflicts came to a head: an old woman whose son had just died shared the story with Paro, who responded with a "sad" head roll and sound. The woman felt understood. I was there with my graduate students and a group of nursing home attendants. Their mood was celebratory. *We had gotten the woman to talk to a robot about something important* and somehow that seemed a success. Yet in that so celebrated exchange, *the robot was not listening to the woman*, and we, the researchers, were standing around, watching. We, who could have been there for her and empathized, were happy to be on the sidelines, cheering on a future where pretend empathy would be the new normal. I was distressed.

So I approached my conversation with Morris thinking that perhaps I could be in dialogue with her as a kind of respectful opposition. But as soon as we met, it became clear that this would not be our relationship at all. Our conversations about Paro were not about any simple notion of benefits. She understood my concerns, and we moved to this: Were there examples from my research where robots had opened up a dialogue? How could the presence of humans with the robots help this happen? What are the situations where a human-technology relationship is mediated by a human-human relationship that brings people closer to their human truth? In the end, the pretend empathy of sociable robots is not a place where I was or am comfortable, but these questions were right.

And Morris's own work brought them to the foreground. I remember the first of her case studies that she discussed with me, where her presence had changed how a family experienced a social activity tracker. (The story she shared appears here as "Family Planets" in chapter 3.) An older woman was using the tracker. Her concerned daughter was in on the results. On the surface, the family's use of the tracker was instrumental: Could feedback from the social activity tracker convince the mother that more social stimulation was good for her?

In practice, the technology became a bridging device to open up a conversation between the daughter and her mother that the daughter did not know how to start alone. Now, with the app, the daughter found new words. The app had a display that showed her mother as a circle, an island that did not intersect with others. Now the daughter spoke of her mother's isolation as "like being on an island, when everyone else you've known and loved has died." These were thoughts that the technology gave her permission to articulate. And Morris's presence, too, gave the daughter courage. Through the tracker, the daughter, and Morris, the daughter and the mother formed a bond; through the tracker, the daughter felt empowered because she had a scientist on her side. Morris helped the daughter interpret an independent view of her mother's isolation. It was nothing to be ashamed of. It was not an accusation. But it was not healthful, and people were here to help.

Here, the tracking technology was an evocative object for talking about feelings, an externalization, and its snapshot of the inner life facilitated new conversations. *People are the empathy app, but technology can help them get more comfortable in that role.* In 2005, Morris and I began a relationship that has never been about my being the opposition, even when we disagree. It is simply about conversation. Which technology opens it up? Which technology closes it down? The fact that a technology is evocative only means it has a potential that can cut both ways. Its holding power can be used to compel you to waste your time on social media that breaks down your sense of autonomy and pride in your own accomplishments. Or it can suggest new framings and new ways of thinking.

Which way it goes can be inflected by the design of the technology. Yet equally critical is the culture that is built around that technology. In the world that we need to build with technology, we don't need critics and enthusiasts. We need to wear down the wall between "users" and designers.

For me, sharing responsibility for technology is the path toward a humane technology that supports us in the lives we want to live.

Morris encourages this kind of thinking because she's spent her professional lifetime paying attention to how people make technology their own in their own way. The stories in this book are the *real* conversations that happen between people and objects. They are almost always not the conversations that were imagined by the designers. They are surprising. Sad. Funny. Hopeful. Human.