Supply Chain

*found

Geppetto found a chunk of talking wood and carved it into a figurine. He just couldn't help but impose a humanoid likeness onto this already magical thing. Heinz Riegler finds a talking robot and breaks it down in search of magic. He inspects each dissected component for deeper mysteries. Every nut, bolt, battery pack and voice-box is laid out for careful scrutiny. Every screw photographed and catalogued in an excel spreadsheet. But eventually like Geppetto, he too embraces figuration and fashions a body from those many thousand robot parts. The assembled body lies lateral, atop a bed of boxes. Whose body? We don't know. And is it dead or does it sleep? Is this a cautionary tale? Like Geppetto's creation we sense a desire for transformation and transcendence. Like a wooden marionette wishing itself into flesh, there's a confused corporeality in the room.

*human

A significant proviso determining a humans' willingness to engage with robots is trust. The psychology of this human-robot trust is shaped by many factors, from the design of a robot's physical appearance, through to its ability to mimic prosocial behaviours such as fairness, reliability, friendliness, even empathy. While today's robots are tasked with making increasingly complex decisions on our behalf, an ability to mimic human-like traits and elicit crude anthropomorphism remains crucial to their reception and acceptance. Online chatbots are given avatars with blinking eyes to simulate attentiveness and engagement. GPS navigators without anthropomorphic cues are perceived less trustworthy than those given a distinctive voice, gender and a name.[1] Just as brand personality is crafted to define the role of a product or service within a consumer's life, opportunities for personification and anthropomorphism are essential to selling the idea of intelligent machines.

*toy

Shuntik is the name of a toy robot programmed to teach children the Cyrillic Alphabet. Using a Herman Hollerith punch card system, it has the computational ability to identify colours, shapes, fruits and vegetables, as well as sing songs, tell fairy tales and assist with some basic traffic rules. It is an edu-bot designed by a Russian company called Fresh-Trend. It sells online for around 500₽ (AUD $8), and gets mixed customer reviews.[2]

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[1] Waytz, Adam, Joy Heafner, and Nicholas Epley. 2014. "The Mind in the Machine: Anthropomorphism Increases Trust in an Autonomous Vehicle." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 52 (May): 113–17.

[2] Shuntik robots range in price depending on which model you're purchasing. The most current Shuntik editions sell for over 3000₽ (AUD $50.00)

Shuntik the robot is humanoid, and not especially complex or original in its design. Made from moulded plastics, its outward appearance is something like Honda's ASIMO crossed with a Fisher-Price Chatter Telephone. It has a smooth blockish head and torso, short arms capped with orange mitts, and two wheels in lieu of legs. Other prominent features include red buttons down its front and a set of punch cards stored in a rear compartment. Its face is an LCD screen. It has pre-programmed pixel features and sometimes it winks.

**junk*

Heinz discovered over 100 Shuntiks dumped outside a warehouse in the Brisbane suburb of Rocklea. The warehouse belonged to a Gel Blaster gun retailer that received routine shipping containers full of imported stock.[3] Heinz found that once a container was unpacked, it was common to see surplus boxes dumped on the street. Over time he learnt that these boxes were full of other random products, products used only to pad-out or "stuff" a gel gun shipment.[4] To the Rocklea retailer, hundreds of stowaway Russian robots were as expendable as old bubble wrap. To Heinz they warranted more attention. He took them all in.

**chain*

To describe Shuntik as Russian doesn't feel entirely right. These plastic robots were made in Shantou, a port city in South China's Guangdong Province. Known as the toy capital of the world, the city of Shantou has over 40,000 registered toy manufacturers accounting for 30 percent of the world's annual production.[5] So it could be said that Shuntik is also Chinese. But should we even attempt assigning nationality to an object navigating the global supply chain? As the organising principles of the logistics industry generate profitable links between distant points of extraction, production and consumption; powerful infrastructure corridors reshape geographies. The supply chain has now superseded the factory, with production broken up into its component parts and rearranged into complex configurations that stretch around the globe. In the case of Shuntik, the polymers and raw minerals of its body may not even be from China, even if its limbs were extruded there. Like so many products, standardisation, circulation and ruthless efficiency shape the edubot's backstory.

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[3] A Gel Blaster or Gel Gun is a life-like toy gun designed to shoot gel pellets. Gel Blasters are prohibited in all Australian states except for Queensland.

[4] Stuffing is a term used to describe filling a shipping container, while de-stuffing refers to the act of emptying cargo.

[5] Global Times, "Toy Production Hub in South China's Shantou Sees Booming Orders despite Global Challenges," Global Times, April 4, 2023, https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202304/1288517.shtml.

nested

Shuntik's cultural non-exclusivity as a mass produced plastic toy sits in contrast to the illustrated character featured on its packaging and punch cards. This cartoon version of Shuntik looks like a cross between Tintin and the Tin Woodman. It has pale blue eyes and a cowlick. It's a smiling Russo-European robot, with possible Nordic ancestry. Who is this Shuntik? Is it branding intended to elicit a stronger homophilic response from Russian parents, or some cosy Disneyfication at play? On closer inspection the cartoon Shuntik holds a space helmet in the crook of its left arm. It's not dissimilar to the toy in the box. Are we to believe there's one robot nested inside another like a matryoshka doll? That Shuntik is both an educational robot *and* a cosmonaut? Is the cartoon helmet not actually a helmet but Shuntik's decapitated head??

dreams

Heinz's meticulous dismembering of this toy - a one person disassembly line - has given him a forensic intimacy with every component, every moulding, every emptiness. He knows the Shuntik robot inside and out, but with sustained attention often also comes a shift in focus. At such close range, material components become fuzzy, their individual purpose malleable and transmutable. Deep within this fuzzy proximity, Heinz has found another anatomical form. This is a classic human form, a resting body held together with zip-ties and shrinkwrap. Through the introduction of corporeal contouring we might see this sculptural gesture as the artist's encouragement to humanise the non-human entity, to recognise thousands of imported plastic parts as exhausted, like Ariadne, or vulnerable, like Hermaphroditus. Does this body dream? Heinz's labour of undoing, disassembling and co-opting the robot as a shell for new meaning has drawn his thoughts to the factory labour of its creation. In this object he recognises stories of alienation and absurdity, of waste and global supply chains, and the sometimes inevitable state of losing one's way. With these thoughts come deeper feelings too, such as affection, sadness, maybe even guilt. It's not as though Heinz hijacked a shipment of toys enroute to the orphanage but he knows that these toys were manufactured for a purpose they now can't achieve. Shuntik will never teach Russian children to read, their lessons like their bodies are disrupted, broken, put to rest. But what new lessons might these objects teach us now? Or does this body simply dream of being left in peace.

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