

Book Review: Artificial Intimacy: Virtual Friends, Digital Lovers and Algorithmic Matchmakers by Rob Brooks

In Artificial Intimacy: Virtual Friends, Digital Lovers and Algorithmic Matchmakers, Rob Brooks explores how new digital technologies are changing our experiences of intimacy and social interactions. While the book provides an excellent historic overview of how sexual practices change in tandem with technological advances, Natalia Kucirkova questions whether it fully grapples with the social issues and ethical questions raised by these transformations.

Artificial Intimacy: Virtual Friends, Digital Lovers and Algorithmic Matchmakers. Rob Brooks. Columbia University Press. 2021.

Can intimacy be reduced to an algorithm?

Find this book (affiliate link): 

Futurists see the zeitgeist of our times as being in flux, always on the move to a different world order that will radically change how we behave and think. [In his new book](#), Rob Brooks views the current era as a transition to the age of artificial intimacy. Artificially intelligent intimate technologies are believed to bring about an extensive sexual revolution that will transform our lives.

Techno-centric prognoses are often difficult to make, especially if they focus on technologies that are woven into our everyday lives and thus depend on socio-cultural and political changes for further development. *Artificial Intimacy's* specific focus on one type of technology and one type of human progress is its biggest strength and weakness. On the one hand, it allows a deep insight into three artificially intimate technologies: matchmaker (such as social media); digital lover (such as sex dollbots); and virtual friends (such as game characters). On the other hand, the author's biological perspective on people as human animals sits uneasily with a broader perspective on human progress.

The lightspeed at which artificial intelligence has evolved has flourished into the publication of several books on the future of self and identity in 2021 (including my own work, [The Future of Self](#), and [The Future of You](#) by Tracey Follows). The ongoing merger of human and artificial intelligence in technological applications raises complex questions for researchers to address.

Brooks's approach in *Artificial Intimacy* focuses on artificial intelligence from the viewpoint of an evolutionary biologist whose main occupation is to study sexual conflict and reproduction in animals. Brooks's position may partially explain the book's emphasis on mechanisms in the survival of the fittest and instant gratification rather than psychological ingredients for human intimacy. But his animal comparisons (for example, citing bonobos that do not distinguish sex from play) risk reducing intimacy to physical pleasure with no higher function.

Several future scenarios are possible with artificial intimacies, and the book describes those driven by individual gratification. Some of the disturbing scenarios for the development of intimacy are more likely than others but none are impossible. Whether it is sex doll bodies that are designed to stimulate individual preferences or responsive Virtual Reality porn where viewers can choose their favourite scene, the key characteristic is that the technologies can be customised to the preferences of the viewer. While the virtual companions currently on the market (offered by companies like True Companion) are not there yet, Brooks outlines how, with the use of personal data, these could develop 'real' personalities that are compatible with those of users.

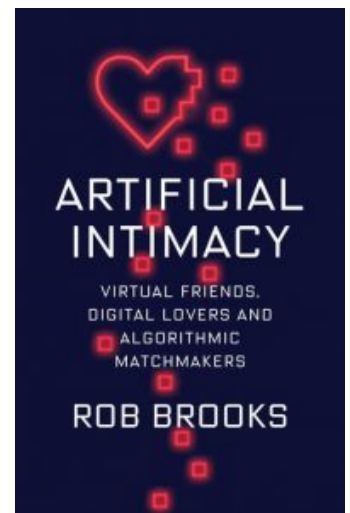




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There is no doubt that artificial intimacies ‘mess up with our heads’. Given that the data facilitating these interactions is supplied directly by users, robots will be able to precisely personalise the interaction to the individual. Users will be able to connect with their digital companions through apps and multiple devices, kindling their virtual relationships. It is the personal data that enables robots to persuade humans to emotionally invest in their interactions, and it is the personal data that also blurs physical and virtual realities.

Virtual companions work on the same principle as current social media in that they learn what users like, what they clicked on before and how to offer them content that further engages them. The technological step from personalised algorithms that converse with users on social media to sex robots is small. But what Brooks underestimates in his future prognosis is the long process that is necessary for an attitude change on the part of users to invite these technologies into their intimate lives. Brooks does not argue for a single definition of artificial intimacy, but the understated role of psychological values weakens the likelihood that artificial intelligence will take over. Whichever way you look at intimacy, humans do not seek out only physical pleasures but also connection, understanding from others, empathy and a sense of belonging. The spotlight on solely tangible, physical and artificial intimacies translates into a bleak prognosis.

Brooks does not shy away from describing the details of such a future. Artificial intimacies will advance their capacity to intensify an individual’s sexual gratification with more human-like robots and techniques for sex at distance. The use of deepfake technology on porn videos will be used for nasty examples of sadism or *schadenfreude*. Anthropomorphising robots and objectifying humans will breed a generation of premium dating apps which sort out relationships based on money and users’ technological savviness. Premium virtual sex companions will be combined with Tinder-like matchmaking algorithms for polyamorous (virtual) relationships, paving the way for new intimate futures.

This being the possible future scenario, examples from evolutionary biology are conveniently amassed in the book to intensify the view of sex as a ‘valuable transaction’. Brooks uses the domestication and training of dogs as a metaphor to explain how we train algorithms with machine learning to do what we want them to do. The author cautions that his book is not for the romantically-oriented. The social view on intimacy, which would take into account the necessary precursors for developing and maintaining a relationship such as trust, belonging and empathy, are important love ingredients unlikely to be supplied by sex dolls:

Friendship and love might seem magical, but they don't arise by supernatural intervention. They are built through mundane, iterative interactions, paying mutual attention, being generous, and disclosing aspects of ourselves to one another. (51)

Readers who believe they will magically find their perfect match on Tinder are unlikely to finish this book. But those who believe that finding an ideal partner on dating sites is possible will find it interesting to read that everything in romantic love can be programmed:

The subjective love-feelings that we think of as love form the middle part of the algorithm. Combinations of hormones lead to syndromes of sensation, and subtle, dose-dependent effects alter the quality of those sensations. Those sensations motivate individuals to take actions they would not otherwise take. (104)

The development of artificial intelligence cannot proceed until we find a stronger human dimension in intimacy. Yes, sex changes as we adopt new technologies. The chapter 'Ploughs, Pills and Porn' is an excellent historic overview of how sexual practices develop, hand in hand, with technological advances. However, technologies develop alongside social understandings of 'self'. We cannot pay cursory attention to the social issues or the ethical and moral questions affected by technological advances: for example, the ways in which artificial intimacies impact social phenomena such as sexual inequality and toxic masculinity as well as how they might contribute to more relaxed attitudes about sex, gender and their everyday manifestations. With the definition of intimacy emerging from a creative tension between the personal and the social, the formula for 'The Love Algorithm' might emerge from the work of artists rather than evolutionary biologists.

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