

WE NEED TO TALK

Dialogue and machine systems in Blast Theory projects

Blast Theory

- A group of artists based in Portslade UK
- Led by Matt Adams, Ju Row Farr and Nick Tandavanitj
- Collaborating with the Mixed Reality Lab at the University of Nottingham since the 1990s
- We make interactive art to explore social and political questions, placing audience members at the centre of our work.



Our work is about

- How technology is reconfiguring society
- The limits of games as an art form and using the city as a civic space for art and play
- Building connections and conversations among strangers
- Challenging who can speak and pushing the boundaries of what can be said



A Machine To See With (2010)
Blast Theory

How we work

- We make the audience the protagonist within the work
- We look for techniques to fruitfully blur the boundary between reality and fiction, between the edges of the work and real life
- We create structures and situations to enable conversation and debate

The Thing I'll Be Doing
For The Rest Of My Life (2013)
Blast Theory





3 projects using dialogue

Ulrike And Eamon Compliant (2009)

- A walk through the city guided by an automated voice call.
- You begin by choosing to be either Ulrike or Eamon.
- As the voice gives directions, it retells episodes in your life, either as Ulrike Meinhof of the Red Army Faction, or Eamon Collins of the IRA.
- At key points, you're asked if to choose whether to continue.
- If you agree you finally arrive at a hidden room where an open ended interview begins with the question: "What would you fight for?"



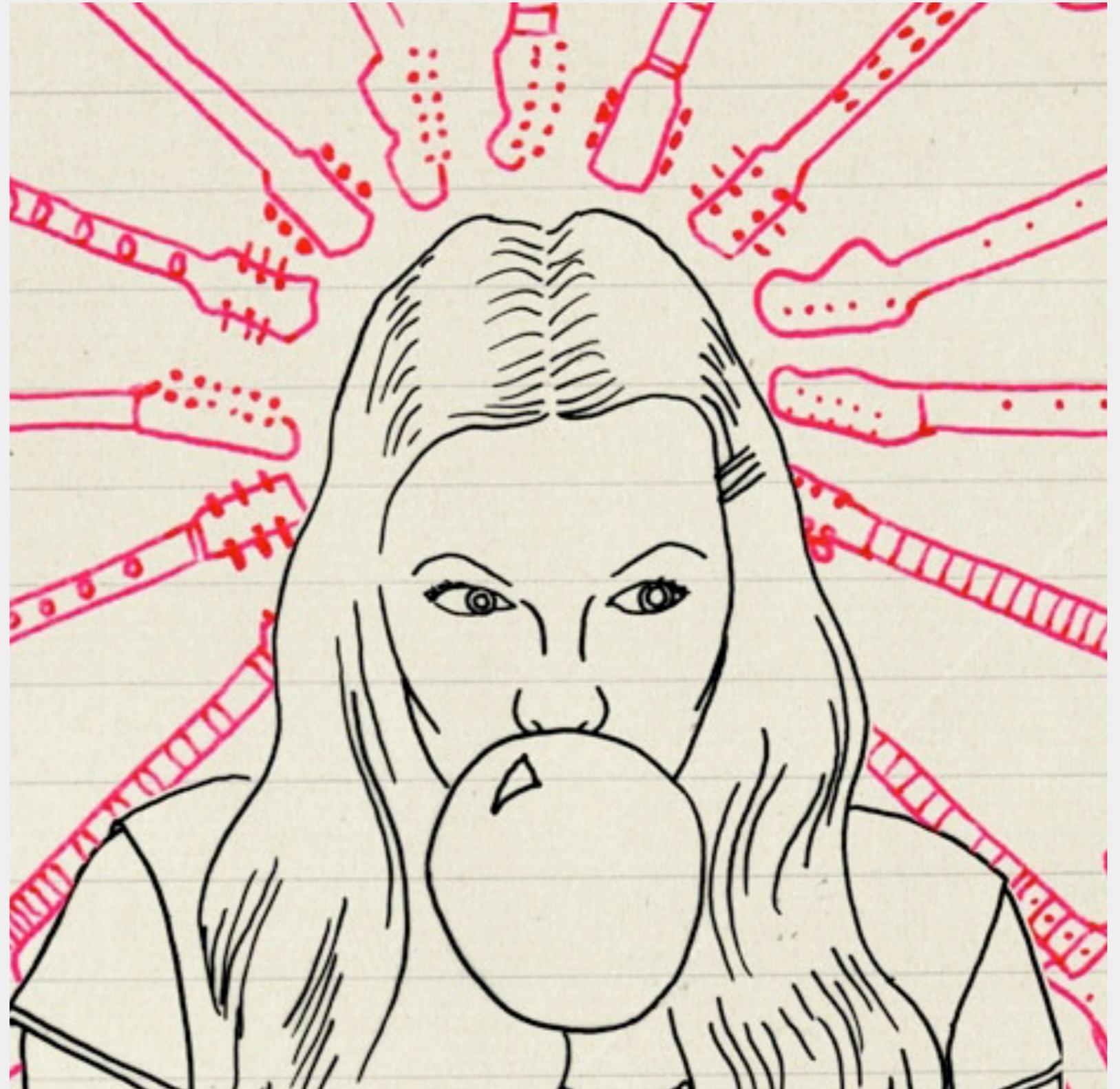
Ulrike And Eamon Compliant (2009)

- The work offers a range of choices as you walk through the city but only one is meaningful - to continue.
- The false interactivity of the walk contrasts with the open nature of the discussion about political violence.



Ivy4Evr (2010)

- An interactive SMS drama, commissioned by Channel 4 Education to engage teenagers on issues of sex, alcohol and drug use
- Written in collaboration with author Tony White
- Over 7 days, audiences chat via SMS with a fictional teenager, Ivy
- Ivy becomes part of your life sending you messages on the way to school, boozy updates late on Saturday night and sarcastic chat on a boring Sunday afternoon.
- If you send her messages, she talks to you about music, friendship, sex, drinking and leaving home.



Ivy4Evr (2010)

- Built through a week long branching dialogue tree.
- Messages from audiences are classified to lead audiences and Ivy along different story branches
- Audience messages are also searched for keywords to trigger 'ladders' of dialogue on specific topics where Ivy shares her own experiences

Hey C, ****personal question**** Q. know someone who missed their period?

Erm, no i dont think i have.....but i've seen stuff on the television about it. Not the same i know, Cx

Sorry to be nosy. Your lucky. I can't talk to my parents about stuff like this though, can you?

Its okay. Well i could, but i don't think i could? Cx

Really?!? Your lucky then. Always thought I would of told Lilsis about something like this.

Yeahh...but i'd be scared to how they would react.

Sometimes you have to make hard decisions in life, bad or good.

Cx

Don't really trust her now. Adz said IF I am do I know who the father would be? Q.Whats he take me for???

Maybe he's just worried for you.? People say things that they think sounds good, or supportive but the intent comes out wrong? When they're worried. Cx

He's looking out for me I know. Sorry if I'm being boring. For some reason I feel like I can talk to you about it... Do you mind?

No, not at all, i'm happy to help. Cx

Operation Black Antler (2016)

- An immersive theatre piece that invites you to enter the world of undercover surveillance and question the morality of state-sanctioned spying.
- You are given a new identity as part of a small team and then sent into an undercover operation
- A fundraising event for a teenager hoping to join the Territorial Army is being held at a nearby pub.
- You must uncover members of a right wing organisation who are suspected to be infiltrating the event and recruiting new members.



Operation Black Antler (2016)

- To progress through the work, you must meet, build empathy with and ultimately try to win the trust of someone whose political and moral views may be the polar opposite of our own.
- Over the course of the work, you engage with a competing range of voices: from you police handler sending instructions via SMS, to leaders of the organisation being targeted.
- As the surveillance operation abruptly ends, a debriefing invites your team to choose a suitable target for intrusive surveillance and discuss whether surveillance could be justified.



Why work with conversation?

Creating a naturalistic form of storytelling

Blurring the edges of the work

Creating a reality that you're engaging with, not just a story

Creating a deeply participatory experiences

You have to think and improvise to progress through the work

Creating tension and jeopardy

What you say implicates you in the situation, and the outcome

Provoking reflection and creating meaning

Verbalising as a form of 'taking account' of (and for) ideas

Creating new roles and possibilities for speaking

Situating dialogues within novel experiences

creates new possibilities for who can speak and what can be said

What roles for AI in this context?

What roles for AI?

The impact of algorithms on our everyday experience



Signs of the Times (2017)
Scott Kelly and Ben Polkinghorne

What roles for AI?

The growth of
machine driven voices

"I'm very sorry to announce the late running of this train..."

Automated station announcement
(Early 2000s)
South Western Railway

What roles for AI?

As a 'poetic' muse

01:20

In a future with mass unemployment,

01:23

young people are forced to sell blood.

01:27

That's something I could do. [laughs]

01:29

You should see the boy in shut up.

01:33

I was the one who was going to be a hundred years old.

01:37

I saw him again. The way you were sent to me,

01:41

that was a big, honest idea.

Sunspring (2016)
Oscar Sharp and Ross Goodwin



What roles for AI?

As a material for investigation
or adversary



Google Maps Hacks (2020)
Simon Weckert

What roles for AI?

As the focus itself for
ethical questions

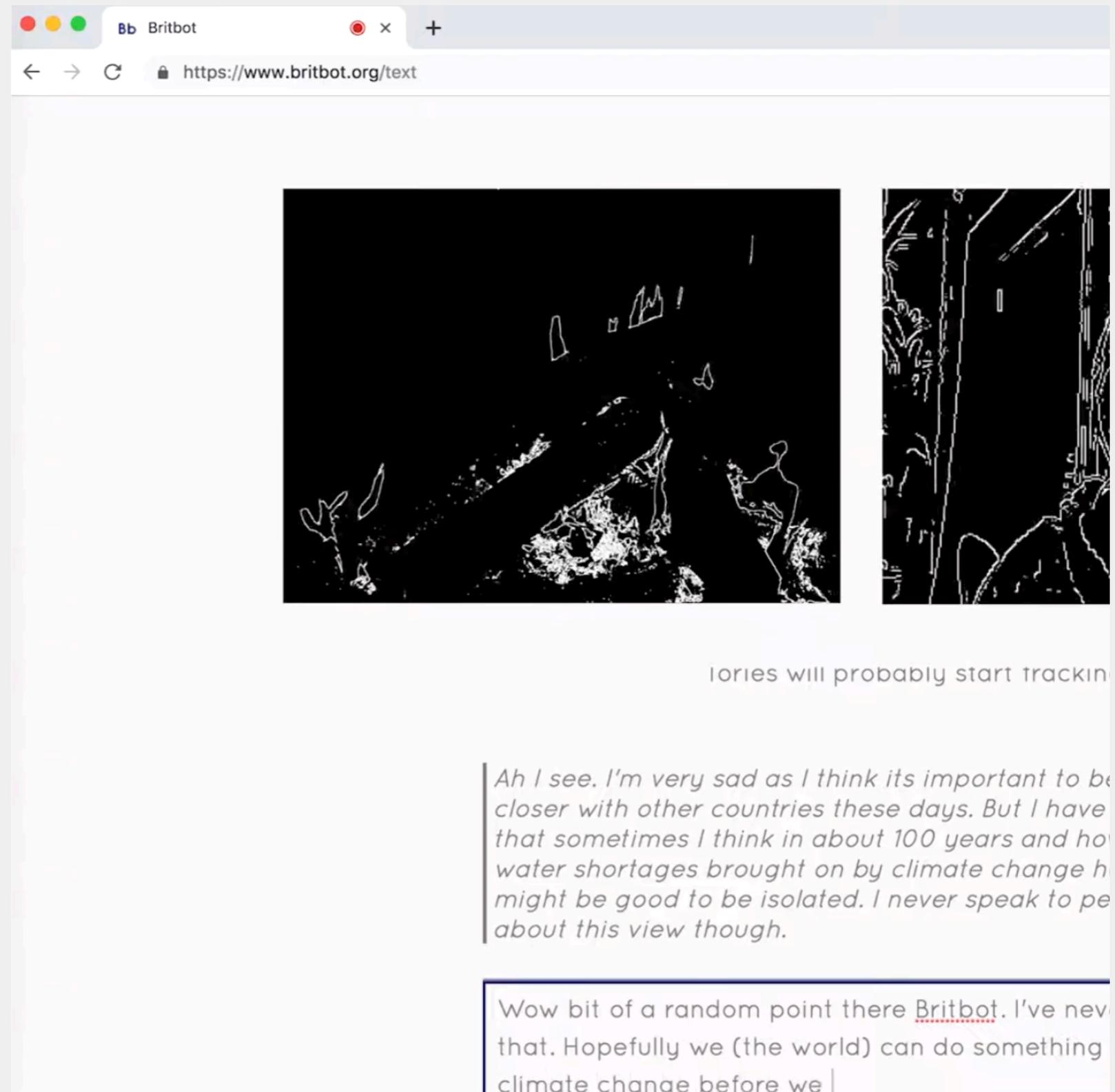


Karen (2015)
Blast Theory

What roles for AI?

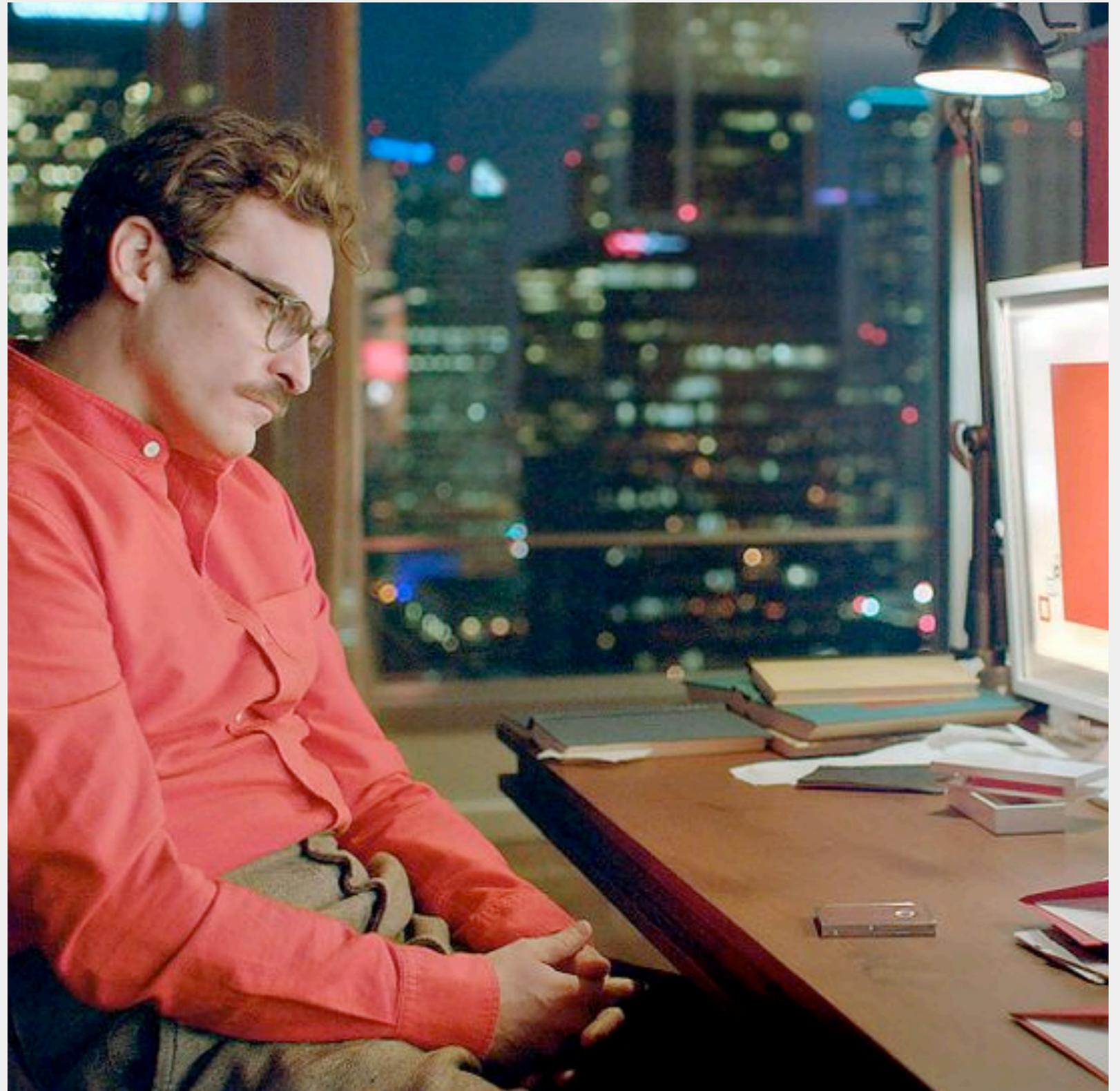
As a disruptive
or naive provocateur

Britbot (2017)
Libby Heaney



What opportunities does it offer to speak?

- Scale and reach
- Memory and access to stored information
- Alternate 'sensing' and experience
- Lack of social bonds and norms
- Mutability of voice and appearance



THANK YOU

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