

The Future is Conversational

The 'chatbot' industry is a long way from having anything close to something that would pass as a human conversationalist. However, it is less about what's happening now, than with the path that is being trodden into the future. As chatbots emerge from the drawing boards and imaginations of techies, they, and their creators, are getting real-world experience. The technology is being tested and it is passing the test. It is this experience that any technology needs to leap from viability to acceptance to ubiquity. The very way that humans communicate with technology could soon be about to change.

Voice recognition is hardly new; of course, we have been dialing friends on our phones, verbally, for years. However, now the technology is answering back. Already, weather reports and news items are being presented by the bots on request. They will recognize words and fulfill a 'search' capability before vocalizing their findings. We are talking to them and they are answering back, though in a very basic way. By definition, these chatbots do not chat. They are merely a user-friendly interface between a human and his computer. The task is a mechanical one, the response likewise. With 75% of Smartphone use estimated to be 'chat', then having an interface to manage multiple screens, verbally, is a logical progression that seems to have been slow in coming.

In 2016 both Apple and Facebook opened up their messaging platforms to allow developers to build bots. The new target is the CUI, the Conversational User Interface. It's all about being 'friendly', not just as in user-friendly, but literally friendly. It is about making the whole chat experience a pleasurable and, yes, friendly experience. In humanizing the experience, along with the tools used in the experience, the whole technology becomes, perceptually, one great big happy-faced emoji- or, at least, that is the theory. The last great 'move' was from web sites to apps; the bot revolution is more of a paradigm shift. However, the change is certainly coming. Major players have already started to change how we browse the internet. The likes Apple Siri, Microsoft Cortana, Facebook's M, Alexa-powered Amazon Echo, and Google Home maybe in the vanguard, but there are many others.

However, for Amazon's Alexa, the chatbot dream goes much further and merges fully into the realms of artificial intelligence. Rather than just acting as an interface between a human and the technology, Amazon look to Alexa to entertain and inform at a conversational level. Initial targets of a coherent 20 minute conversation between Alexa and a human seem some way off, but the ambition, the intention, is there. Google, for example has bought 11 AI start-ups over the last few years. Microsoft and Apple are not far behind. Why invent a solution that already exists? Just acquire it- along with the expertise and the genius to take it further.

Up until now, the drive towards the Conversational User Interface has been, primarily, driven by consumers and the projected desires of consumers. That is now changing and is likely to accelerate any advance. As the bot gets more human, its capabilities seem to be getting more technical in nature. If information is power, then the ability to find and retrieve that information is more powerful- and the ability to utilize that information becomes pivotal. At its most basic level, answering a customer service call faster, while 'dropping' fewer calls; retrieving that customer's details and information immediately- and correctly- can turn an unpleasant 'lose' situation into a win. Even more importantly, the call could

have been made redundant, if the company had been able to intervene at an earlier stage. A client's entire journey within a business could all be within the 'mind' of a bot as a complete, searchable stream, rather than a series of calls and emails that need to be physically found, scanned and acted-upon.

This all may seem a long way off from your laptop wishing you 'Good Morning' when you turn it on, first thing. The weather forecast is also there, soon to be vocalized. A soothing song while we scan the papers drinking our espresso may seem a lot to ask, but in this day and age, be careful what you wish for.