

CONVERSATIONS

A celebration of Sherry Turkle's career
on the occasion of her 70th birthday.

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many years ago. Psychoanalysis had discovered Skype.

Soon I was back on the podium with Sherry and Gillian Isaacs Russell, a new ally in hard conversations. This time we were talking about how psychoanalysts are uncritically over-using technology as a delivery-system for psychoanalytic care. We believe it is time to reclaim therapeutic conversation from the seductions of easy connections. We are now conversing with each other more than ever about how psychoanalysts' embrace of remote treatment not only provides sub-optimal care, but also how providing such care unwittingly paves the way to culture-wide acceptance of simulations of empathy and artificial intimacy (we have called it, with a wink, "the other AI").

So, the hard conversations continue, grounded by attention to the personal meanings and consequences of what people are doing and not doing with these amazing tools. Hopefully, my work, so embedded in these conversations, will continue to be nourished by Sherry's curiosity, patience, and tenacity.

A WALK TO RADIO SHACK WITH SHERRY TURKLE

Stefan Helmreich

Sherry Turkle's tape recorder was dying. It was 1992 and she and I were in Santa Fe, New Mexico, attending a conference on "Artificial Life," a genre of computer science pitching itself as a successor to "Artificial Intelligence," with practitioners promising to simulate and synthesize not just cognition, but also life itself. I was an anthropology student at Stanford, starting

fieldwork. Sherry was collecting interviews about how people were coming to invest their emotions in computationally created or mediated objects and identities. Her tape recorder had slowed to an analog crawl, and she invited me to join her on a stroll to the nearest Radio Shack.

I'd been reading Sherry's work since undergrad days, so was delighted to compare notes about Artificial Life scientists' relationships with their simulations—simulations they viewed as self-contained digital ecologies, worlds over which they could preside as forces of artificial—natural selection or cybernetic gods. For them, the computer was not just the digital mirror Sherry described in 1984 in *The Second Self*, but was rather an alternative reality.

In 1995, Sherry published *Life on the Screen*, placing Artificial Life scientists alongside people projecting their identities into online avatars. In *Silicon Second Nature*, from 1998, I argued that Artificial Life retold, *in silico*, time-worn science fiction tales of masculine monogenesis (think Frankenstein) and American frontier exploration (think cyberspace as Wild West). If Artificial Life scientists hoped, as they said, to “rewind the tape” of evolution, playing out paths life might have taken, their fast-forwards sounded strangely familiar.

Life on the Screen foretold the rise of social media. The story of the closed worlds of Artificial Life, meanwhile, had more attenuated futures. The field became more influential for its techniques—such as genetic algorithms—than for opening new epistemological vistas.

In retrospect, though, Artificial Life's dedication to mimicking life in digital worlds might still tell us something about

today's life on the screen. In 1950, mathematician Alan Turing proposed that computers might “pass” as *intelligent* if they delivered convincing imitations of human communication. In *Silicon Second Nature*, I suggested that computer programs might pass as *life* if they generated plausible vital performance. While Artificial Life performances never satisfied wide publics, recent computational agents have been notable for their powers of persuasion. In the US presidential election of 2016, disturbingly lively “Russian bots” and “fake Americans” passed the Turing Test for many Internet users. These digital agents, like Artificial Life's digital organisms, *doubled* cultural expectations—not about *real life*, but about what counted, for many, as *real Americans*.

Sherry has lately called for “reclaiming conversation,” for re-installing the real in face-to-face encounter. Thinking back to that walk with Sherry, I am tempted nostalgically to pose tape recordings of conversations as an analog “real” overtaken by deceptive digital doppelgängers. But recalling a cassette tape advertisement of the 1990s that asked, “Is it live or is it Memorex™?” I am also reminded of Sherry's great insight: that our second selves and natures always bear the imprint of our technological times.

TALKING WITH SHERRY

Susan Rubin Suleiman

My conversations with Sherry usually take place over food. Maybe it's our shared love of France that makes eating so much a part of talking, and vice versa. A meal accompanied by