CROOKED DATA

(Mis)Information in Contemporary Art

Home   Artists   Curator's Preface   Digital America   Programs & Events   About

Blast Theory   < Return to Artists

Karen
2015, mobile device app

courtesy of the artists © Blast Theory

1/1

Interview of Matt Adams (Blast Theory) by Digital America, December 2016

Fascinated by Big Data and how governments and social media corporations were handling user data, Blast Theory created the application *Karen* to question the role of artificial intelligence in our lives, and to highlight how quickly and carelessly we divulge information online. Over ten days, users interact with *Karen* once or twice a day by answering a series of questions. Interactions with *Karen* become increasingly uncomfortable and complex as users complete the sessions.

Karen's design as an amalgamation of the digital and the human provides a dynamic and often confusing experience for the user. Why did you choose an attractive female actor, as opposed to textual representation, to be the face of *Karen*? How do you think this design influences the relationship between us as users and consumers of this product and the product itself?

> BT: *Karen* sits within a long tradition of work that satirizes AI or plays with AI as a concept. It goes back maybe as far as Hal in Stanley Kubrick's film 2001: *A Space Odyssey*, which is perhaps the first or most famous instantiation of that. We played around with the idea of *Karen* as a kind of a construct, but the more that we developed the project the more we felt that it was really important that

this work doesn't sit easily within the tradition of AI—the unknown or uncanny causes of AI. This project should put you in the position where you're slightly off balance all the time as to exactly who this woman is and what your relationship with her is within the fictional frame and an extra level of "What's this thing that I'm engaging with?" Although at some level, *Karen* is a kind of front for a data collection process. She is also very human and her life is very ordinary in many ways. And so we deliberately avoid any of the science fictional tropes of AI, and the work in itself doesn't really acknowledge any of that data collection stuff within the frame of the work. The idea is that your immediate personal response to *Karen* should always rest inside your awareness of what *Karen* represents and what the project as a whole is doing, and so that ambivalence should be present.

As for the gender issue: there are a few parts to that. It is a cliché that AI is female and it's certainly been commented more on this year [2016], I would say. There is a lot more writing about it, and I think the makers of Cortana, Siri, etc. are more aware of that then they used to be and [thus] create male voices. I quite like the idea that we take the cliché of artificial intelligence, which is an idealized version of womanhood, and make her someone who is struggling with her life and is no way a silky voiced companion along the lines of the model that they use in the film Her. The other part of it is that I also just don't think that there are enough really good roles for woman, so it was nice to make a really rich and complex representation of a woman who is in her early 40s as well. Her age and her life stage is really deliberate as someone who is trying to deal with the breakdown of the main relationship in her life. Clearly your gender and your sexual preference make a difference when you're in a conversation with someone like that—quite intimate and at times very frank, and at times almost flirtatious. I think those responses will be very diverse, but I think it's a great tribute to Clare Cage's performance. Even though you know that this a completely pre-canned performance, that she's available for tens of thousands of others, you still feel that there is a connection between you and her. We were trying to play with the sense of intimacy and forced intimacy that a video platform offers.

By day four, *Karen*'s professionalism as a life coach unravels, and the relationship between coach to client shifts. She overshares, becomes hypersensitive, and emotionally attached. Is *Karen*'s psychological deterioration a commentary on the malfunction and disconnect that occurs when the digital attempts to mimic human behavior, or is it something more broad?

BT: Definitely more broad. What we are trying to do is have something that works on a number of different levels. On one level, this is a story of online relationships and the danger of getting close to someone online when you don't really know much about who they really are and what their backstory really is. It's partly a commentary on the presentation of ourselves online. It is partly about online dating and this idea that we are increasingly sifting through strangers for our relationships online, and it fits within a tradition of stories of relationships gone wrong. It's one of the dominant memes of the past few years: people who present themselves online one way and then turn out to be very different. And it's partly a satire on life coaching. Of course one of the reasons that she thinks she's a great

life coach is because she's been having therapy to sort out all of the shit in her life, and she completely mucks that up, but she feels the therapy has been a great thing. She takes it upon herself to think, "Oh, wow. I can actually do this. I quite enjoy this. I can talk to people about problems and come up with solutions." And, of course, she's actually the worst person to do that. It's a symptom of her malaise, not a symptom of her competence, that's she's going through those life coaching type things. And it's partly a satire on the suggestion that you can fix people or that things can be addressed at that sort of level, and it's kind of a bot gone wrong story. And it's a story of a woman who is really suffering, and that gradually becomes apparent as the story develops.

We are also thinking about why software monitors us, and why are we so relaxed about that? What drives that? Why do we quite love it when Facebook pops up and provides a video of our life from the last year? Rather than the feeling that that is suspicious and unwelcome. Billions of people really welcome that. There is this solipsistic impulse that within these systems, which is as long as it's me reflecting back to me in a way that feels knowledgeable, we sign up to it. We don't mind that at all. You end up setting a positive feedback loop with software by saying, "By all means, scrape up information about me so that you know my taste and feed it back to me." This work is really standing slightly apart from works that have been made in the past years that kind of critique data monitoring and data collection and has more to do with why we like that so much and what makes us so drawn to that.

Your process for creating *Karen* included mining hundreds of personality tests. Could you talk about the specific types of questions that you chose for *Karen* and why?

BT: We read hundreds of them. And one of the core insights and developments of the piece was that you have all of these psychological tests that are based on you answering a question, and the questions themselves are very interesting, just as an interview question or of you talking with a friend over a drink. Some were really fascinating. It was that insight that, "Oh, this could be dialogue." *Karen* could slip every one of these questions into a conversation with you and ultimately end up with enough answers that she could make a psychological profile of you. That insight was a really big breakthrough in the work. There were loads of really good sexual ones about sexual inhibition, sexual insight, openness about sexual life, and they were all just really interesting because they were things that you don't talk to people about. They are hidden knowledge in a way. We found those all really interesting. The others were on behavior and weaknesses—mapping your fallibility and susceptibilities to different weaknesses. We were particularly drawn to those, but ultimately we had to strip out enormous amounts of those questions. One of the actual core scales that we used in *Karen* is around openness, and in the second lesson that she gives you she asks you five questions that come from scales of openness, and then we use your position on that openness scale to determine the rest of the story later on.

As a group of artists, how do you handle the tension of a work that critiques the over sharing of information online, but simultaneously requires the user to overshare?

BT: It should be intrusive. This is the power of the app as a form. It's entirely private at one level and very intimate—your phone is the most intimate technology (maybe). And so when you get asked an intrusive question by *Karen* you are forced to answer it to move forward. You either put it down and never touch it again, or you answer it. In some of the user testing we looked at a strategy of lying. "I'm not going to tell you that, I'm going to tell you something else." For users who tried to do that, it became very redundant very quickly, because when *Karen* responds to your lie, it's not very interesting because it's not the truth. So what we found was that even with people who started off with a strategy of lying to *Karen*, they quickly reverted to telling the truth because they actually kind of want to know. Any work that is satirical is of course playing with those boundaries. You play with the unacceptable in order to shine a light on the unacceptable. We obviously agonized long and hard over the privacy policy to the work, and we made what we feel is absolutely the best form of privacy policy that we could. The data is anonymized incredibly quickly, and once it's been stored for research purposes, it has no other use in any other medium and even then it's anonymized very rapidly. The idea is that precisely when that intrusive question comes, you are aware of this thing collecting your data and what might then be happening with it. It maybe heightens your awareness of a piece of software collection and why it might be doing that and where that data ultimately ends up.

Computers have been acting as pseudo-psychologists since MIT's ELIZA in 1964. Did the long history of affective computing influence your work on *Karen*?

BT: We were very aware of that—it is notable work. Some of the people in this psychological area, either in business or in research, see this as another demonstration on how software can be used for therapeutic purposes. We're clearly at a threshold in terms of these kinds of systems that I think will become explosive. I can't say that we looked deeply into the history of affective computing, but we did look into ELIZA and the tradition of bots and Turing tests. It's part of our intent that the work activates those connections and then poses questions about the appropriateness of those approaches.

Do you view the code to the app *Karen* as a means to an end, or do you see the code as part of the artwork itself?

BT: Clearly without the participant taking part in the work, it's nonexistent. In that sense the work is completed by the user. I see all those things as parts of the work. We very deliberately make work where the boundary of the artwork and the real world and society at large is diffuse or unclear, because we want to put you in a position where you're implicated by the artwork. It's why we have *Karen* send you little alerts, and we think you'll be pestered by some of them. I have many people say to me that their partner will say, "Who is *Karen*? Who is this person? She sent a message at one in the morning last night saying 'call me.'" It's deliberately trying to kind of flirt with that boundary as to where you almost have a little intimate relationship with this fictional character for those ten days. She has some kind of role in your life where you don't know when she's going to pop up or when you're going to engage with her. It's always fleeting but it's still in

your life. It's not a distinct activity, and it's not under your control when it happens. You have to wait for the next chapter to become available. All of those things are about trying to infiltrate the artwork into your life. But then to speak more widely, clearly the code and the research that comes out of it and the discussions around the work are all absolutely part of it and very valuable for us.

What is the research that comes out of the work?

BT: We are about to begin the phase of research with colleagues at the University of Nottingham who helped us develop the app, and part of that will be assessing the logs by looking at patterns of behavior, looking at the prevalent choices versus unusual choices, looking at the data reports, how many people have bought data reports, and what those data reports say. It will be very exploratory—it's not very clear. We've worked with the University since the late 90s and written about thirty or forty papers with them. So it's typical that our work will do some papers.

Founded in 1991, Blast Theory is a Portslade-based art group whose work explores multimedia and performance. Lead by Matt Adams, Ju Row Farr and Nick Tandavanitj, the group's collaborative work aims to determine how technology can be used as a cultural and personalized space. Touring nationally and internationally, the group has received numerous accolades, including several interactive arts BAFTA awards, honors from the Prix Ars Electronica, and Arts Council England Innovation Awards.

www.blasttheory.co.uk
www.blasttheory.co.uk/projects/karen