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# Karen, an App That Knows You All Too Well

By FRANK ROSE APRIL 2, 2015



From left, Nick Tandavanitj, Ju Row Farr and Matt Adams of Blast Theory, a British art group that created the app *Karen*. Andrew Testa for The New York Times

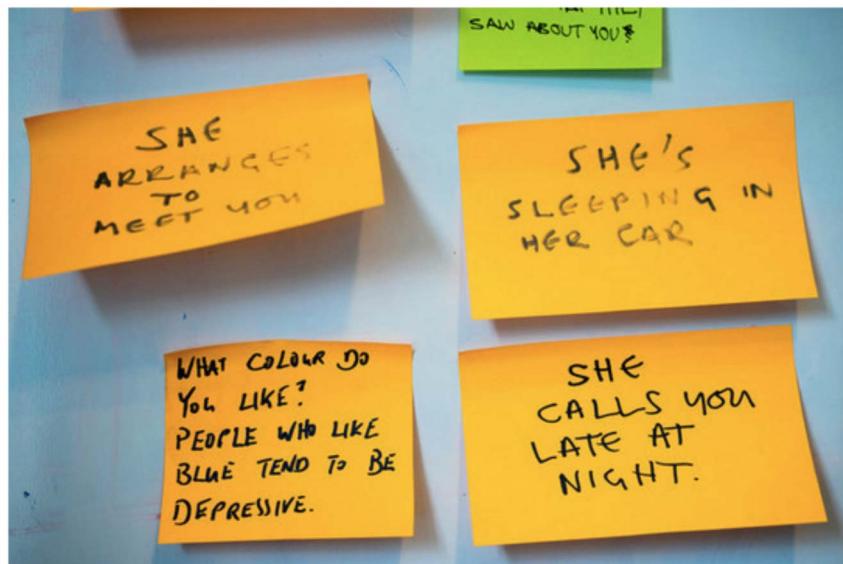
LONDON — Thinking about a life coach but not ready to commit to the real thing? App stores offer lots of electronic alternatives that can be downloaded to your iPhone or Android device. There's [Success Wizard](#), which promises to "help you plan, focus and achieve real and lasting results." LiveHappy, brim-full of exercises from the California psychologist who wrote "The How of Happiness." [Niggle](#), for people who want "a pocket sized coaching buddy on call 24/7." And soon, from the British art group [Blast Theory](#), an entirely different approach: [Karen](#), a mock life-coach app that develops boundary issues and leaves its users feeling distinctly uncomfortable.

Karen is a fictional coach in a software-driven experiential art piece. Part story, part game, designed to be played over a period of days, it offers a deliberately unsettling experience that's intended to make us question the way we bare ourselves to a digital device.



A message from Karen Video by blasttheory

Unlike most real life-coaching apps, this one displays video rather than text — a tactic that makes it easy to forget the distinction between what's digital and what's human. When you open the app, Karen (played by Claire Cage, an actress who has appeared on the British TV series "Coronation Street" and "Being Human") starts speaking to you directly, asking a series of questions.



Storyboards for the app. Andrew Testa for The New York Times

She seems winsome and friendly — a little too friendly, perhaps. "She's only recently out of a long-term relationship," explained Matt Adams, one of the three members of Blast Theory, "and she has a hunger for a new social alternative."

The dynamic that unfolds is somewhat reminiscent of “Her,” the 2013 Spike Jonze film in which Joaquin Phoenix’s character falls in love with an operating system. With Karen, however, it’s not the user but the app that starts exhibiting inappropriate behavior. “She develops a kind of friend crush,” Mr. Adams said. “And over the next 10 days or so, she feeds back to you things she’s learning about you — including some things you’re not quite sure how she knows or why.”

One other thing that’s different about Karen: It’s not a movie. It’s a personalized experience that plays out on a smartphone or tablet. There is no fourth wall. There is no Joaquin Phoenix. This story is about you. It morphs to fit the user, based on information the user supplies, choices the user makes and inferences the app itself begins to make. And just as you reveal yourself to Karen, she reveals herself to you, in ways that veer farther and farther from a legitimate life-coach experience.

Beginning April 16, shortly after it’s scheduled to be available for free download on Apple’s app store, Karen will be featured in the Tribeca Film Festival’s Storyscapes competition, which showcases innovative, interactive approaches to storytelling. “I love the idea of a life coach that goes wrong,” said Ingrid Kopp, director of interactive at the Tribeca Film Institute and curator of the competition. “And I thought it would particularly appeal to New Yorkers.”

Ms. Kopp has had her eye on Blast Theory for a while. Based 50 miles outside London in the seaside resort town of Brighton, the group has a reputation for edgy, tech-infused work combining games, video and performance. “We’re interested in the intimacy of mobile phones,” Mr. Adams said. “How they might be thought of as a cultural space. Karen was an opportunity to take this strategy further — how you might engage with a fictional character who is software-driven.”



Claire Cage, who plays Karen in the app. Ruler

But few software characters offer the peculiarly ego-boosting appeal of adapting themselves to the user. This makes Karen an intriguing tool for exploring the knotty relationship between digital personalization and human solipsism. "We know we're making a satanic bargain" when we rely on personalized devices, Mr. Adams added, "but it's a rich, murky space, and we're not entirely sure what we think."

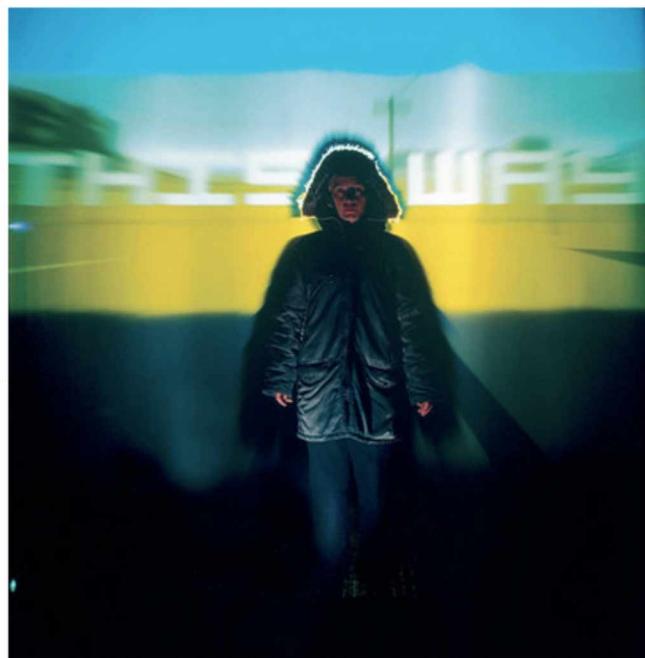


Desert Rain Video by blasttheory

Blast Theory has explored murky territory before. One of its early works, the [1999 installation “Desert Rain,”](#) thrust six people at a time into a scene of virtual desert warfare projected onto a curtain of rain — a medium that blurred the line between the real and the digital. The six players had 20 minutes to locate six characters in this shadowy landscape and get out alive. Only by watching a video at the end did they learn that the individuals they were searching for were actual people — a British soldier, a BBC journalist, a peace worker — in the Persian Gulf war of 1991.

Another piece, “[Ulrike and Eamon Compliant,](#)” commissioned for the 2009 Venice Biennale, began with visitors entering a small wooden room in the baroque [Palazzo Zenobio](#), picking up a mobile phone and being asked to select an identity. They could be Ulrike, a magazine writer and single mother who lives in West Berlin, or Eamon, a customs worker and father of four in Northern Ireland.

Following instructions on the phone, they set out across the mazelike passages of Venice. Along the way, it grew apparent from talk of bank robberies and assassinations that they had chosen to be either Ulrike Meinhof, a leader of West Germany’s Red Army Faction, or Eamon Collins, a hard-line member of the Provisional Irish Republican Army — two of Europe’s most notorious terrorists during the 1970s and ’80s. Eventually, after a series of probing questions, it also became apparent that the journey from idealist to murderer might not be as far as one would think.



A scene from an early Blast Theory work, the 1999 installation “Desert Rain.” Blast Theory

Karen, like “Desert Rain” and “Ulrike and Eamon Compliant,” was developed with support from the University of Nottingham’s Mixed Reality Lab, which looks at how digital technologies can affect everyday life. The lab investigates such matters as the nature of online consent — a project that, using a standard readability test, recently found Google’s terms of service to be slightly harder to comprehend than “Beowulf” — and the role of personal data in constructing online identities.

“Karen is an artistic probe of that question,” said Steve Benford, a professor at the Mixed Reality Lab who has worked with Blast Theory extensively. Like some earlier Blast Theory projects, he added, “it goes against the fundamental principles of user experience design,” which call for eliminating sources of discomfort rather than introducing them. The lab granted a residency to another of Blast Theory’s three partners, Nick Tandavanitj, working with him to develop the app’s profiling technology.

The project was co-commissioned by [the Space](#), an online art center funded by the BBC and the Arts Council of England, and developed in partnership with [National Theater Wales](#), which plans to stage a live-action event for a limited number of Karen users this summer. A [Kickstarter campaign](#) yielded an additional \$28,000.

To give Karen a sense of verisimilitude, Blast Theory turned to Kelly Page, a Chicago-based consultant who brought together elements from a variety of standard psychological evaluation systems, including mood repair questionnaires and tests to measure the “big five” personality traits: openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism.

Like actual life-coach apps, Karen starts off by asking about your emotional state: Would you say that you are sometimes sad but have a mostly optimistic outlook? That you had a happy childhood? That you get stressed out easily? That you try to think good thoughts no matter how badly you feel? Other apps, however, are unlikely to drop in a mention of their recent divorce — or drag you down the hall to peep through a partly open door at some guy named Dave who, she breathlessly informs you, is stark naked. Later, as you learn more about Dave and Karen and their emotionally complicated relationship, you’ll be invited to join one or the other of them in some rather unseemly escapades. How far will you go? The answer can be as revealing as anything you tell Karen directly.

Early on, during the getting-to-know-you phase, Karen looks into the camera and says, “If you share with me, I can help you find out things about yourself you might not even realize.” That, of course, is the promise of life-coaching apps — and in this case at least, it turns out to be true. Users won’t know how much Karen has learned about them until they reach the end of the experience, at which point they’ll be invited to purchase (for \$3.99) an extensive — not to say invasive — psychological profile compiled by the app itself. But Karen is not really “about scraping information about you and shocking you into awareness,” Mr. Adams said. “We’re not trying to take an activist perspective.”

Karen can be played strictly for fun. But if you wish to engage on a deeper level, the question it aims to provoke is somewhat subtler: Where do we draw the line between our devices and ourselves? Karen posits a future in which the definition of what’s human has grown fuzzy, not because some mad scientist has created a race of humanoid robots, but because we all want a buddy in our pocket that acts as if it knows us. Or at least, we think we do.

As Mr. Adams observed, “It’s always interesting to work at the boundary of something we’re very drawn to and very unnerved by at the same time.”

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