

Should androids have the right to have children?

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

In contemporary science fiction, we often see robots passing themselves off as humans. According to a UiS researcher, the genre problematises what it takes to be accepted as a human being and provides a useful contribution to the debate about who should have the right to reproduce.

Science fiction culture has prospered and gone from being for nerds only in the 1970s and 1980s to becoming part of popular culture in the last two decades. This particularly applies to the TV series genre, which has become mainstream with *Battlestar Galactica* (2004), *Heroes* (2006) and *Fringe* (2009).

"The genre has evolved from depicting technology as a threat, to dealing with more intimate relations between humans and machines", says Ingvil Hellstrand. In her doctoral thesis, she points out that science fiction today is often about humanoid androids that are trying to become "one of us".

According to Hellstrand, this is not incidental.

"Contemporary science fiction reflects current changes in a destabilised world, relating both to boundaries between Us and Them and the boundary regarding what it means to be human. This theme is closely connected to the revolution in medical technology in which we find ourselves", Hellstrand explains.

She debated this at the University of Stavanger earlier this year with her thesis "Passing as human. Posthuman worldings at stake in contemporary science fiction".

The struggle for acceptance

In her thesis, Hellstrand refers, among other things, to the male humanoid robot, Data, in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987) and the Cylon robots in *Battlestar Galactica* (2004–2009). These and the other series she has studied show changes in the science fiction genre, while also highlighting how the struggle to be accepted as human is related to the development of society.

Data is an android with advanced, artificial intelligence who is attempting to learn human behaviour. He deduces that being a parent is an important part of the human experience, and decides to reproduce and have a "daughter".

Hellstrand believes that Data is an interesting example of our own contemporary possibilities and challenges.

"Data argues for parenthood as a practice and not merely as a purely genetic identity. This feeds right into the debate that has been going on in Norway since the end of the 2000s. Norwegian biotechnology legislation was revised and opened access to assisted reproduction for all co-habiting women in either heterosexual or homosexual relationships", explains Hellstrand, who is also affiliated with The Network for Gender Research at UiS.

The right to have children

The gender researcher believes that an obvious question in the current debate is: If surrogacy is allowed in Norway, then in the name of equality, will a single man also have the right to become a single parent? Furthermore, will two fathers be acceptable?

Hellstrand points out that the discussion about reproduction is closely connected to both political rights and the right to control our own bodies, which is an important feminist argument.

"Regarding surrogacy, feminist principles relating to the mother's body and rights are also challenged by men's needs and rights to provide care for children. It is important to discuss such matters from a new perspective based on the current technological situation, without either overlooking or clinging to traditional feminist arguments", says Hellstrand.

"The question regarding who should have the right to assisted reproduction is a debate that changes with our understanding of what it means to be human and the norms relating to identity and belonging, especially parenthood. These are big questions that we, as a society, are struggling with", Hellstrand says, and refers to Nina Karin Monsen who blindly argues for a distinction between those she calls "natural children" and "constructed children", where the constructed children are a result of assisted reproduction among homosexual couples.

Unlike Monsen, Hellstrand thinks that the term "natural" should be problematised to a greater degree. She wishes to challenge our conventional conception of what is natural by referring to science fiction.

"The cyborgs are now having children. Cyborg in this context refers to Donna Haraway's political figurations for describing how technology and biology have become so entangled that it is almost impossible to distinguish them from one another. Take assisted reproduction, for example. It provides technological assistance to – or enables – biological processes. As Haraway says: "With our increasing dependence on technology, we are all cyborgs. Perhaps the androids will be next?"

The new enemy image

Hellstrand regards the science fiction genre with its radical future scenarios as suitable for shedding light on the ethical and political dilemmas of our time. The researcher also emphasises the ability of science fiction stories to absorb changes in society when it comes to the threat of terror.

The TV series *Battlestar Galactica* is about human survival when faced with a warring society of robots called the Cylons. They see themselves as a new step on the evolutionary ladder, with a greater capacity for

feeling and giving love than humans. Their attacks and infiltration are a revolt against human hegemony, and the goal is to exterminate mankind.

"This series has been read as one that focuses on global political and ethical issues after 9/11. The series illustrates how fixed enemy images are gradually replaced by a new, more fluid and uncertain image of an enemy: The enemy is among us", Hellstrand explains.

The most significant robots in *Battlestar Galactica* appear in women's bodies. They have sexual and intimate relations with men. The character's love life and sex life are a central part of being accepted as human. They have a desire to reproduce in a conventional manner, precisely in order to pass as human; being human is a type of behaviour.

"They cannot be differentiated from a "real" human, and are accepted as human until they suddenly reveal that, actually, they are not. This is also part of highlighting today's uncertain enemy image", Hellstrand says.

Exploring human boundaries

Hellstrand wishes to problematise the "human" category and feels that we should be open to several possible definitions of what it means to be human.

"Identities such as mother, father and parent are often confined to a closed or restricted meaning. There are a great many implied qualities and values connected with the terms "mother" and "father".

Nevertheless, we know that perceptions about current motherhood or fatherhood have changed throughout history."

Hellstrand reminds us that challenging traditional roles is a central part of feminist theory and gender research—one that seeks to broaden established gender roles rather than restrict them.

"Even though we now have new watersheds with a more open diversity of family type, it is not a given that we have a diverse understanding of motherhood or fatherhood. We need more discussion and openness here", maintains Hellstrand, who believes in a future with greater diversity in relation to identity, not least with regard to technological possibilities and social relations of our time.

Hellstrand thinks that science fiction helps shed light on what is at stake when acceptance or lack thereof challenges our perception of what a human being is—ethically, politically and ontologically. She uses feminist theory and post-colonial theory to explain how "the human" is related to our understanding of "normal" and how this in turn is linked to power relations based on gender, sexuality and race.

"Science fiction is a suitable medium for exploring humans and their boundaries. Our debate on sexuality, gender and different forms of assisted reproduction demonstrates how we understand the terms "real" or "correct". These are strongly connected to the hegemony of the heterosexual nuclear family", Hellstrand explains.

A more courageous debate is required

This year, egg donation and surrogacy are being debated under the auspices of the Norwegian Biotechnology Advisory Board.

The gender researcher reminds us that the biotechnology debate is particularly sensitive as it involves real people who have made choices, all of which are taboo, and, in some cases, not permitted by law in Norway. Nevertheless, she would like a more robust debate.

"We need a more courageous debate about what it means to be [human](#). Science fiction can help us with this. In science fiction radical things can be started, concretised and pushed to extremes", Hellstrand says.

The researcher believes that this genre can change our perceptions and recommends that the Norwegian Biotechnology Advisory Board watch television programmes about androids.

"I think that the Norwegian Biotechnology Advisory Board must deal with future possibilities in their work on formulating ethical policy guidelines for our time. What if the advisory board had taken into account an equivalent abundance of possible social structures and social relationships as are found in the [science fiction](#) genre? I think that the Norwegian Biotechnology Advisory Board can learn from the range of dilemmas, questions and solutions that are found in fiction, and in this way perhaps consider that their suggestions should apply to future situations, and not just current ones.

Provided by University of Stavanger

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