

Why sex robots are ancient history

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The sexbots are coming. To a bedroom near you. No longer the stuff of Hollywood fantasy, sexually "functioning" robots are now available to buy and try. And according to [some commentators](#), they are the future of sex. [Newspapers](#) speak of an upcoming trend in robotic sexual activity, and [Vanity Fair](#) referred to the "the Rolls-Royce of sex dolls" in a recent

profile of an American manufacturer.

So the future of sex robots is coming fast, it seems. The much publicised "Roxxxy" ("always turned on and ready to talk or play"), marketed as "the world's first sex robot", was available to pre-order last year and is supposed to be ready now to buy online (for just \$6,995 plus shipping). But do note that she – it – can be engineered either to talk or play. Not both. So choose your customisation options carefully.

Among those who welcome this acceleration of sex robot technology is David Levy, whose bestselling book [Love and Sex With Robots: The Evolution of Human-Robot Relationships](#) imagines a distinctly utopian future as its result. Levy predicts that the lonely and the bereaved especially will benefit and that "many who would otherwise have become social misfits, social outcasts, or even worse, will instead be better-balanced human beings". In this [robo-utopia](#), prostitution, sex-crimes and loneliness will be consigned to history. "The world will be a much happier place because all those people who are now miserable will suddenly have someone. I think that will be a terrific service to mankind," he says.

He may be right. Abyss Creations, the designers and makers of "RealDolls", claim that their products have been purchased by a nursing association, prostate cancer survivors, burn victims and those with disabilities. It also claims that psychiatrists use them in therapeutic treatment and that parents buy them for use by their autistic or socially excluded grown-up children.

But co-founder of the [Campaign Against Sex Robots](#) Kathleen Richardson thinks Levy has got it wrong and that the utopian future he promises is actually a dystopian fantasy. "Paedophiles, rapists, people who can't make human connections – they need therapy, not dolls," she argues. She also takes issue with the gendered and misogynistic narrative

that Levy's robo-utopia assumes – the sex robot as a passive, female, object, purchased and "prostituted". Its users as active and male, purchasing safe sex on demand and avoiding messy interpersonal relationships with [real women](#). Richardson and the supporters of her campaign argue that we need to question and change that narrative.

Computer scientist Kate Devlin is doing precisely that. She highlights the ways in which popular narratives about robot sex – such as recent films like [Lars and the Real Girl](#), and [Ex Machina](#) – are shaping the discourse and informing attitudes on both sides. Devlin wants to challenge those negative narratives about sex robots and looks forward to "carving a new narrative". Or, rather, look backward...

Statues to robots

Because one of the ways Devlin suggests we might plot a less polarising narrative about sex robots is by returning to some ancient stories about human/humanoid sex:

The relationship between humans and their artificial counterparts runs right back to the myths of ancient Greece, where sculptor Pygmalion's statue was brought to life with a kiss. It is the stuff of legend and of science fiction – part of our written history and a part of our imagined future.

The Pygmalion myth, the story of an artist whose lifelike statue seemingly comes to life is best known through the Roman poet Ovid's retelling of it in his [Metamorphoses](#). It can be read as a morality tale on the virtues of celibacy and a celebration of chastity, the life of a lonely social misfit transformed through love for his "living doll".

But we might deduce that Pygmalion carves his ivory statue and takes her to bed with him because he is disgusted at the prospect of sex with

real women, misogynistically viewing all women as morally and physically repugnant "whores". Nor is Ovid wholly sympathetic to Pygmalion's enterprise. The text suggests that the statue is somehow the artist's child, that their relationship is unwholesome, unnatural and incestuous.

One of the likely sources for Ovid's story is an account by the Hellenistic historian [Polybius](#) of a terrible ancient automaton owned by the Spartan king Nabis. A realistic robot designed and dressed up to look just like his dead wife Apega, she would crush men to death in her metal embrace.

What's more, we might remember that the Pygmalion story itself replicates the original anti-feminist "robot" narrative – Greek poet Hesiod's account of the creation of Pandora in his [Works and Days](#) – a "beautiful evil" (*kalon kakon*) – and the first in a long line of sex robots whose existence has stretched from Ancient Greece and Rome to a warehouse in modern California. The sexbots are coming? They've been here longer than you might think.

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