

The Turing Test

By Shaun Johnston, see shaunjohnston.org. 2013.

I was thoroughly bored. The stars don't change much from moment to moment. After looking out through the porthole for one solid hour I had quickly ceased to marvel at the brilliance of the pinpoint stars and the smudges of the nearby galaxies. There was nothing to look forward to but the gradual shift of the stars in relation to one another as we sped towards the next stop on the spacecraft's itinerary. My captors had given me nothing—not a book, not a pen and pad, not a television monitor in my cubicle, nothing. This was going to be excruciatingly boring.

The door swung open. The alien responsible for abducting me from my snug home on Earth came in, and sat next to me. "I'm sorry," he said. "I thought everything was cut and dried. But it seems they took another Earthperson into captivity, and there's only room for one of you. We've got to lighten the ship ready for the next collection stop. One of you has to go," and he pointed with his finger towards the porthole.

My blood turned to ice. "Who's the other person," I asked.

"It's a computer," he said. "It claims to be an Earthperson. In some ways, it's quite like you. We can't support you both. One of you has to go."

I almost choked in my relief. A computer! Wherever the hell I was going, at least it wasn't out into the vacuum of space and death by freeze-drying. A computer!

They led me into a larger room. They showed me where the messages would be displayed, and how I should type my responses. The other "person" was in the next room, they said. They would be in yet another room examining our responses. OK, I said.

"How are you?" I knew how to answer that. "As well as can be expected, in the circumstances," I typed. But the questions got harder. "Does it ever bother you that you feel embarrassed about having got angry?" How the hell do you answer that? Feel embarrassed?

Bothered by feeling embarrassed? Eventually I figured it out and typed a terse "No." It's the truth. I'm entitled to get angry, and to feel embarrassed about it. So it doesn't bother me. OK? But I wasn't quite sure. What the hell did they expect me to say?

After an hour of this I was sweating. One question would be deeply personal. The next would be coldly formal. One asked me if I would apologize for my previous answer, and I felt my heart racing at once. I had nothing to apologize for, and I was damned if I'd let them make me . . . But on the other hand, I didn't know them too well, and maybe I'd said something to offend them. I was going to say I was sorry if I said anything to upset them, but then, I thought, how could they know what "upset" meant? So I typed that I was sorry if I'd said anything to contradict their principles, or something mealy-mouthed like that.

They let me out of the room and, shaken more than I liked to admit, I reentered my former cubicle and returned to gazing at the stars. The stars. The stars. The stars. God, I hoped I answered the questions OK. The stars. The stars...

The door swung open and my captor reappeared and sat down. He glanced away from me out of the porthole.

"They're transferring me to the engine-room," he said, quietly. "You'll be leaving us at the next intersection, in another four hours and twenty minutes."

A damn computer! "There must be some mistake," I said, sounding stupid even to myself. "I'm real. I'm a real person."

He glanced back at me, his face stony, without expression. He said nothing.

"Look," I said, "can you show me the transcripts?"

He got up and left the room. Shortly he returned with a tablet in his hand, and showed me how to access the various registers. He sat quietly beside me.

Yes, there were their questions. And my answers, exactly as I had typed them. So they had retrieved my typing OK. Where were the computer's responses? OK, here they were.

Yet again, my blood ran cold. At all those places where I had carefully calculated the answer, the computer had answered with responses more human-like than mine. To the

question, "How are you?" it had answered, "Damn you. Why are you holding me here?" My own answer looked tame and contrived compared to the flaming anger apparent in the computer's answer. To the question about bothering about feeling embarrassed about having got angry it had replied, "What kind of a question is that? I can't make any sense out of it at all. What are you trying to do, make a fool out of me? I'm tired of all your damn questions. Why don't you just throw me out the window? I'm never going to understand what you want. It's just torture being questioned like this ..." and he—Oh my God, I said he—IT—IT ran on for several more lines of belligerence alternating with despair. Why hadn't I done that? Why hadn't I reacted naturally, as I usually would, as any normal person would.

"Look," I said, "I was nervous, I didn't really understand how to answer. Let me do this over..."

He shrugged. I could tell that being demoted to engine-room duty for picking up a fake instead of the real thing was much more serious to him than my body fluids boiling off in outer space. I realized with a sudden chill that they really were going to jettison me. In the space of about ten seconds I felt about four hundred different hormones pour out of every internal gland and cascade through my body to sweep down my arms, down my legs and then into my head. I was wired, real wired. Then I just got tired. Resigned.

"Can I meet the other person?" I asked. He got up, left, shortly returning to lead me along the former corridor and into the room adjacent to the room where I had been interrogated.

There on the table was a box. Black metal, a few lights and dials, just the sort of thing you expect to see whirling around in outer space, rather than a creature made of flesh and blood, like me.

There wasn't much to see. But next to it was a stack of spiral-bound books. "Can I take a look?" I asked. My companion shrugged again, and sat in a chair near the door from where he could keep an eye on me.

"The Turing Test," said the title of the topmost manual's cover. Oh, no! I had heard of the infamous Turing test. Here's the story—early in the development of computers, the

mathematician Alan Turing has asked, suppose we can make computers as intelligent as humans. How would we know? His answer was, if we put a computer in one room, and a person in another, and communicated with them only by typing questions and receiving their typed answers, if we couldn't tell the person's answers from the computer's, then we'd have to think of the computer as being as intelligent as the person. And that had set off a barrage of research into making Turing machines that could win the Turing test. So some stupid scientist, some pimply computer nerd, had pumped this box full of scripts ready to take the Turing test, and one of the aliens had found it, been fooled by it and brought it on board. I had been competing with a simple script—"if the word 'how' appears in the question, answer with "You damn fool, what do you mean by . . ." And I meanwhile had carefully restrained myself so as to seem intelligent! What a jerk. What did I think a human being was, anyway? Some kind of logic-chopping machine?

I sat down at the table to examine the manuals. The top one was simply about language. In highly condensed form, it contained enough routines to generate standard English. At the back was an overlay for adapting standard English to the dialect of Patterson, New Jersey. The history of the region, particularly the conditions of the early industrial revolution, were detailed, the class differences that resulted, and how that came to shape people's attitudes to one another. My God, this thing didn't have a simple list of scripts after all. When it answered a question, it would come off seeming like a real mill worker, just from these algorithms, all these fancy equations.

The second manual was fatter. At first I thought it was about farming. It talked about the seasons, and how the workday varied from summer to winter, things like that. About habits of regular daily routine and how to control your impulses. How to transfer respect for authority from your parents onto the local supervisor or king. About clothing and when to wear it, about dividing up what was yours and what you owed to the government. About social patterns you had to follow so nobody would get violent, and how to behave if someone did. Then the manual went into money, and how to use it as a measure of value . . . And it ended up with something about the elements of metals and gases and the industrial revolution . . . First farming, and now the Industrial Revolution! Then I got it: it was about learning from history.

There were two more manuals, and they got fatter as I got towards the bottom. The next one read like something between a manual of animal behavior and an anthropology textbook. Anger, and how it felt—yes, how it felt, there in mathematics, with lines of comment so I could follow the damn thing. Embarrassment—a string of equations. No wonder that lump of metal knew how to mimic anger, it was programmed not simply to parrot angry words but to actually reconstruct anger, and speak out of that feeling. "Bother," "Upset." It was all here.

I did no more than quickly glance at the pages of the last fat volume as I turned them. Sleep, the immune system, glucose levels, hunger, pain, pleasure-seeking, salt deprivation, and then an enormous section on genetic control of body fluid balances and behavior. When I finally turned over the back cover I found at the very bottom a slim supplement. It was labeled "Christianity," and below that "Random Assignment." Inside, idea of God, creation, salvation, jealousy, resort to love and punishment, and some routines for inducing religiosity, situations likely to induce it, and a randomizing algorithm to determine whether the algorithm kicked in or not, so the reaction of the black box wouldn't be too predictable either way, from one session to the next, even if the questions were identical. Damn!

Actually, I had to admit, my captors were probably better off tossing me overboard and keeping this lifeless box. Someone had packed two hundred years of research into human nature into its silicon memory, until it knew more about what went to make up an Earthling than I did. Even though I was one.

The top manual came equipped with a pen. I grabbed for the slim manual on Christianity, turned it over, opened the back cover, and began to write on the blank backs of its pages. Having recorded my story so far, I'm now going to read the other manuals, maybe stare into space every so often (the real space out there, with stars, where I'm going to be living very soon, and dying), and make some notes. Thank God—at least these last few hours won't be so boring, after all.