The Naming of Robots

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Background

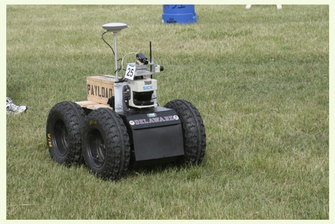
Naming is a fundamental human activity that is an increasing part of emerging human robot relations. Gender is still a significant issue in science, technology and engineering.

Robots stand in for humans as model [in]organisms. The initial query, whether gender had an impact on robotics research, was concerned with implicit design bias, which would propagate through robotics.

There are grounds for further research in that area but the data collection process also demonstrated ways in which human and nonhuman classifications were put into play.

A new vocabulary is required for this emerging new ontological category of 'robot'.

Examples



Clockwise from top: Candii, Cornelius, Warthog & Viper. Photos from IGV website.

Methods

Document collection is an important ethnographic method which, along with participant observation, provides a balance for interviews or self reporting. Grounded theory requires the collection of data before applying theory, so the name categories were developed over the course of the research project.

Measures

Names were ultimately distributed across 4 categories; Male, Female, Unknown and Other.

Male and Female were classified as such if there was reasonable evidence of gender.

Unknown is not simply ungendered. It suggests a category of lifelike but not human which I refer to as 'biomorphic' (not anthropomorphic).

Other is explicitly mechanistic rather than biologic and includes linguistic plays on awareness of 'bot' history and culture.

Male:	Thor PRO	Hal	Brother Jerome	Achilles	Johnny 5
Female:	Candii	Anassa 4	Spinster	Amber	Hurricane Annie
Unknown:	Robo-goat	Jabber-wocky	Lion One	Creature-bot	Warthog
Other:	Moon-walker	Paradroid	Biplanar Bicycle	H2Bot	RS3

Figure 1. Samples of names and version strategies from IGV competition.

Research was confined to global competitions with English websites and primarily attracting university students or researchers. There are many of these competitions which are seen as valuable tools for networking and communication.

Evaluating human robot interaction at a developmental level may reflect implicit design biases or cultural baggage or might reflect new relationships between humans and the world.

Results

Preliminary results from 6 competitions yielding 2000 names are summarised by focussing on 2 contrasting competitions; IGVC, the annual Independent Ground Vehicle Competition and Chatterbox for virtual social agents.

Competition	Chatterbox	IGVC
Male:	30%	30%
Female:	26%	8%
Unknown:	25%	35%
Other:	19%	27%
Total Names:	143	364

Figure 2. Gendered, animistic or ungendered and mechanic names

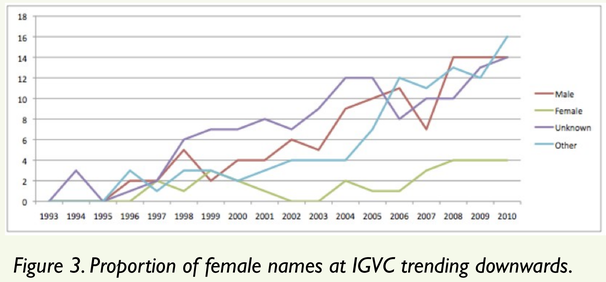


Figure 3. Proportion of female names at IGVC trending downwards.

Discussion

The naming of research robots is a widespread practice with more than 2/3rds of robotic names reflecting 'biomorphic' or lifelike non-mechanistic attributes. Robot naming either replicates human gender stereotypes or is evidence of prosthesis (or projection), the extension of self into the robot.

Robot names that avoid anthropomorphism, gender or animism are still subject to version control strategies, highlighting the difficulties that we face with regard to robot identity.

Human robot interaction needs an expanded vocabulary to address these issues in the emerging ontological category 'robot'.

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