From Russia, with Love

How I got fooled (and somewhat humiliated) by a computer
BY ROBERT EPSTEIN

IT ALL STARTED with an online dating service. I was looking for a date. Like most men (we dogs), I made my initial judgment based largely on a photo. Yes, that's shallow, and when one is online, it's also fairly stupid because photos are all too easy to fake. But this time, I *really* blew it.
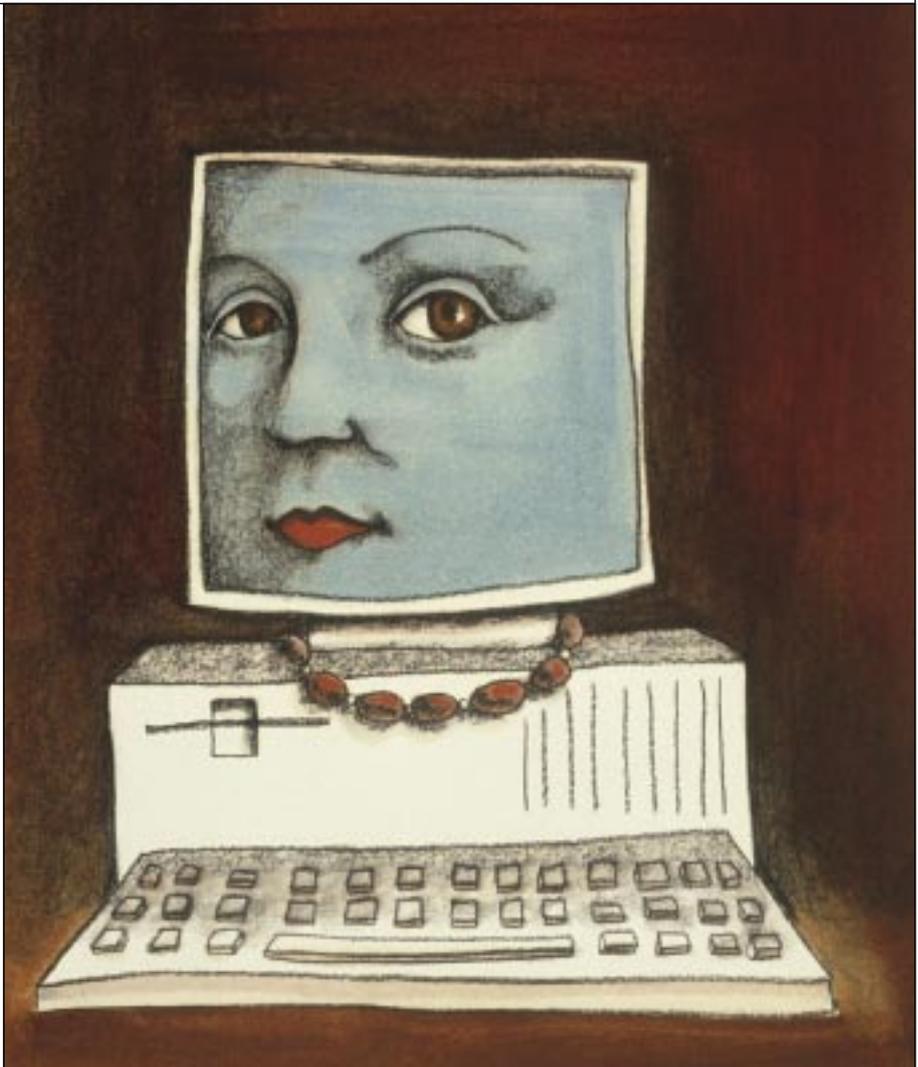
The main photo showed a slim, attractive brunette, supposedly living in California not far from me. She didn't say much about herself, and her English was choppy, suggesting that she was a recent immigrant. That's okay, though; all four of my grandparents were from Russia, after all.

Her screen name was a variation on "Amélie Poulain." Had I been more of a European film buff, this moniker would have worried me. *The Fabulous Destiny of Amélie Poulain* is a 2001 French film starring Audrey Tautou as Amélie, a strange young woman who has a crush on a man but is incapable—*completely* incapable—of communicating with him in conventional ways. Hmm.

She responded to my e-mail quite affectionately—and also admitted that she really lived in Russia, not California. Normally I find that kind of distance daunting, but her photos were so attractive and her e-mails so warm that I continued to correspond with her. She sent me her real name; I'll call her "Ivana."

Here is an example of the kind of e-mail I received from her:

> I have told to mine close friends about you and to my parents and them happy that I really interested someone and regardless of the fact that not here in Russia and all from them happy for me, that I have met you. I have very special feelings about you … It—in the same way as the beautiful flower blossoming in mine soul … I only cannot explain … but I confident, that you will understand me so I wish to know that makes you, think, and I shall wait your answer, holding my fingers have crossed …

After two months of e-mails I started to get, well, not suspicious exactly but at least concerned. Online dating can be a slow, frustrating process [see "The Truth about Online Dating," by Robert Epstein; SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN MIND, February/March 2007]. Our romance was progressing especially slowly: no phone calls, very vague talk on Ivana's part about get-

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ting together—no real *movement*.

I also noticed that Ivana's letters seemed a bit redundant and, let's say, narrow in scope. She wrote, over and over, about her interactions with her mother and her friends, but she never brought up a million other things: politics, movies, music, books, fashion, you name it. More important, when I

nearly four months with a computer program—specifically, a chatterbot, which is a program designed to converse with people over the Internet.

I had been fooled partly because I wasn't thinking clearly: I had wanted to believe that a beautiful young woman really cared about me. But let's face it—this was also darned clever

and I certainly should have known better in my exchanges with Ivana. I am, you see, supposedly an expert on chatterbots. I have been a computer nerd most of my life, and in the early 1990s I directed the annual Loebner Prize Competition in Artificial Intelligence, a contest in which judges try to distinguish between people and computer

(Like all good scientists, I am trying hard now to turn **lemons into lemonade**.)

made very specific observations that presumably would have been of interest to her—for example, a comment about Russian president Vladimir Putin's latest crackdown—she seemed to just ignore me. Hmm. Now *that* should have tipped me off.

A Walk in January

Finally, in a January e-mail Ivana mentioned all the nice things she was saying about me to her friend while they were on a walk in a park. I wondered: Do people really go for walks in Nizhniy Novgorod—a large city about 200 miles from Moscow—in the dead of winter? A weather site on the Internet told me that it was 12 degrees Fahrenheit and snowing heavily when she was supposedly on her walk. I questioned her about that—*but she ignored my query*.

I started scrutinizing her subsequent e-mails very carefully. Sure enough, all the signs were there: the content of Ivana's notes was generally only marginally responsive to my correspondence, and when I sent her queries that demanded replies to specific questions, she was *never* responsive.

At that point, I sent her the ultimate test. I wrote:

> asdf;kj as;kj I;jkj;j ;kasdkljk ;klkj 'klasdfk; asjdfkj. With love, /Robert

And Ivana reacted with another long letter about her mom.

Aha. I had been interacting for

programming. The most successful conversational computer programs these days often fool people into thinking they are human by setting expectations low, in this case by posing as someone who writes English poorly.

Tricks That Work

A truly intelligent, thinking program has been the holy grail of computer science for more than half a century [see "My Date with a Robot," by Robert Epstein; Scientific American Mind, June/July 2006]. The grail is still well out of reach at the moment, with programmers relying mainly on what many would call trickery to create the impression—usually for no more than a few minutes—that their programs are people. Jabberwacky, A.L.I.C.E., ELIZA and other conversational programs often circumvent real intelligence simply by echoing back part of what a real human has written to them ("pattern matching") or by being humorous and irreverent.

I should know about such things,

programs. I am even editing a 600-page book, coming out in a few months, on this very subject.

Like all good scientists, I am trying hard now to turn lemons into lemonade. With Stephanie Alderson, an undergraduate student at the University of California, San Diego, I am in the process of cataloguing and rating the "humanness" of more than 80 online chatterbots. This exercise is, as you can imagine, largely for my own protection.

Meanwhile, somewhere in Europe or Russia (most likely), a very smug, very anonymous computer programmer has got Ivana chatting with hopeful, naive men around the world, carefully tabulating her successes—and tweaking her to be more humanlike every day. **M**

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(Further Reading)

◆ **The Turing Test: The Elusive Standard of Artificial Intelligence.** Edited by James H. Moor. Springer, 2003.
◆ **The Turing Test: Verbal Behavior as the Hallmark of Intelligence.** Edited by Stuart Shieber. MIT Press, 2004.

GETTY IMAGES

Russian women find non-Russian men attractive because Russia is a very chauvinist society and they are not always treated well at home. Excessive drinking among men is common place. in Russia and western culture is more respectful towards women and in many cases, western men are more loving and romantic towards their partners. In my experience Russian women are loving and very sexy but also sensible and down to earth so treat them kindly with love and respect and they will reward you with mutual respect and nights of wild passion as only Russian women know how !. This site provides you with access to the world's leading introduction and dating site for genuine Russian women of all ages. Hundreds of men have successfully found love here and many have married. From Russia With Love perfectly threads the needle between art and commerce, showing us everything that's allowed the series to keep on keeping on. Nov 2, 2018 | Full Review… Zaki Hasan. Cliff-hanging, 1964: that's From Russia with Love. That is, you get a complete serial every five minutes, often with a new babe or two falling for James Bond's masculine charms. Dec 30, 2017 | Full Review…

'From Russia With Love' is the second and last of the Bond films to be made without a rigid formula. With 'Goldfinger', the expected elements of the later films would all accrue in a single film, setting a template the series would struggle to escape from (and, for the most part, would not bother trying to). Â By contrast, the crucial pivot of 'From Russia With Love' is whether Bianchi's Tanya will side with Bond or SMERSH - the age old 'love or duty' dilemma. The film also takes time with detours that have little to do with the main plot - as in the sequence at the gypsy camp. There is a real feeling of a functioning world around Bond's escapades, rather than just colourful 'exotic' backdrops. From Russia with Love is a 1963 spy film and the second in the James Bond series produced by Eon Productions, as well as Sean Connery's second role as MI6 agent James Bond. It was directed by Terence Young, produced by Albert R. Broccoli and Harry Saltzman, and written by Richard Maibaum and Johanna Harwood, based on Ian Fleming's similarly named 1957 novel. In the film, Bond is sent to assist in the defection of Soviet consulate clerk Tatiana Romanova in Turkey, where SPECTRE plans to avenge Bond's From Russia, with Love, published in 1957, is the fifth James Bond novel written by Ian Fleming. The novel was adapted as the second official Bond film in 1963, which was itself adapted into the 2005 third-person shooter video game of the same name.