

Juliana Lutz

Professor Al Dixon

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Technology as a Parent

When technology advances, we celebrate our progress and marvel at how far we have come. Computers, cell phones, and all of today's products demonstrate the amazing human drive to create new things. But when we see futuristic movies like *WALL-E* in which humans seem to have morphed into a dependent species, we begin to ask: is this what progress looks like? A bunch of baby-like humans riding around in hovering chairs with robots as servants? The way people in these movies interact with their technology is unsettling, but not too far off from our current relationships with our devices. Other films that look closer into the future such as "Parenthood" and *Robot and Frank* can help us understand the stages that lead to our dependence on technology, and this dependence can take on a specific form when our technology begins to take care of us. Modern films reveal that technology has the potential to evolve to the point that it becomes a parental figure – a role that it is not equipped to fill.

Technology does not immediately take over the role of parenting; first, we allow it to help us parent. The Apple commercial "Parenthood," advertises the iPhone 5 by showing short scenes of daily life for a parent, such as a mom turning off her phone alarm in the morning and a dad using his phone flashlight to show his daughter that there are no monsters under her bed. The commercial ends with "You're more powerful than you think" written across the screen. This bold statement has several implications: first, it suggests that humans doubt their own abilities and don't think they are powerful on their own. Second, it offers a solution by implying that

owning an iPhone makes us more powerful – the iPhone is advertised, therefore, as an extension of the parent. This is how technology becomes integrated into parenting – it is presented as an add-on rather than a replacement for a parent. As a parenting aid, technology offers more efficiency and provides a "quick fix." In one clip, a mother places her iPhone on top of a drawing so that an animation of a lion fits into the picture. This provides quick and easy entertainment, allowing the mom to spark her daughter's imagination with a few taps on her phone. Another family uses an iPhone animation to teach their daughter how to brush her teeth. The little girl seems disinterested until her attention is captured by the video, and then she starts properly brushing her teeth. These clips show how technology can help a parent to entertain and teach their children with ease because the phone provides a quick and fun means of conveying information to a child. The mother in the first scene doesn't have to draw a lion face to capture her daughter's interest but can simply put a phone in front of her, and the parents in the second scene can make the practice seem exciting and new with an animation. The characters of each scene may appear to be sharing simple and sweet experiences, but there is a rather unsettling detail: everyone looks at the iPhone during intimate moments rather than at each other, as shown in the screenshots below. One scene shows a father and his daughter gardening together, but never once do they look at each other - instead, the father shows his daughter something on the phone. The focus is on the phone rather than on the shared experiences. One could argue that the reason the phone is the central point is because the commercial is trying to sell the iPhone, however the commercial seems to sell the *experience* of owning an iPhone, which is clearly characterized by the phone entering normal interactions and inevitably decreasing intimacy. Research has shown that simply having a phone around during a conversation is "linked to feelings of decreased empathy and closeness" (Broadbent, annualreviews.org). This is no

surprise since the phones seem to distract children rather than bond them with their parents. Throughout the commercial, the refrain "living a life of dreams" is repeated in the background, implying that owning an iPhone as a parent creates an idyllic lifestyle. It starts off saying "I'm living a life of dreams" but transitions to "we're living a life of dreams," which implies connection, but in reality, the iPhones seem to be a barrier blocking face-to-face interaction. The song sounds almost like a lullaby, lulling people to let their phones be a part of their lives. At first, by offering quick and easy aid, technology poses as an extension of a parent and promises to make the parent better. This is how technology begins to be integrated into the parent-child relationship. Even though the parent and child are still interacting with each other, a phone is being used to facilitate the interaction; the phone, rather than the parent, is the source of both entertainment and education.



Sometimes, once technology has been incorporated as a parenting aid, people begin to prefer technology over the parent. This idea is seen in *Robot and Frank*, a movie about a retired jewelry thief named Frank, whose son buys him a robot to help take care of him. Because he suffers from dementia, Frank has become like a child again in that he needs constant care and a regimented schedule to prevent him from becoming disoriented. When Frank's daughter Madison comes home and tries to step in and care for Frank, he lashes out in anger because he prefers the robot's help. In one scene, Frank comes downstairs while Madison is staying over

and notices that the house is perfectly clean. He accuses Madison of turning on the robot momentarily to clean up and then turning it back off, and he begs her to turn on the robot permanently. When she refuses, Frank angrily throws pasta at her, exposing his preference for the robot's care as well as his emotional attachment to it. Madison is bound by human limitations – for instance, in one scene she fails to make real lasagna because she lacks the skill – while the robot can download nearly any skill instantaneously, making him a more efficient caretaker who can more easily please Frank. This demonstrates how we can begin to prefer a robot substitute rather than a human parent, who is inevitably flawed. Frank also seems to prefer the robot as a friend rather than human friends; he explains that he is angry at Madison because she treated the robot like a slave, turning him on and off when she needed him. Frank feels the need to defend the robot and expose Madison for mistreating it because he feels emotionally connected to the robot. He tells her “I need him... he's my friend.” It's arguable that Frank likes the robot because he doesn't come with the complications of human emotion; for instance, Frank says that the robot is starting to grow on him when he learns that the robot has no programming to require it to follow the law. He realizes that the robot does not feel remorse or guilt, so it can help Frank with his crime and be loyal to him without offering any opinions. This lines up with author David Levy's claim that people may prefer to interact with robots – who are programmed to be “social, smart, and loyal” - rather than with “unpredictable humans” who “do not always behave as desired” (qtd. in Broadbent, annualreviews.org). Frank enjoys the robot's company because it doesn't judge him for stealing or try to change him, but instead works alongside him and does what he asks. If technology is a parent, it is one that gives in to whatever the child asks with perfect ease, so naturally we can begin to prefer the technology.

Once we begin to prefer technology over our real parents, it is only a matter of time before it becomes so deeply integrated in our lives that it becomes our primary caretaker. When technology becomes the sole parent, it inevitably fails and converts people to helpless infants because it is not equipped for the role. This is seen in *WALL-E*, a movie depicting a dark future in which humans have made the Earth unlivable with trash, causing them to move to space aboard a ship called the Axiom. The people literally look like infants, with short and chubby appendages and baby faces, as shown in the photo below. The passengers of the Axiom simply call for a robot whenever they need anything – from a drink, to shade from the sun, to a haircut. Technology is the ultimate helicopter parent, catering to its children’s every need, so people on the Axiom are conditioned to no longer do anything for themselves. But while a good parent would help a child to develop and become independent, the robots in *WALL-E* encourage laziness, such as when the robots tell John to “please remain stationary” when he falls out of his chair, instead of showing him how to get up and walk. The people do not know any better than to keep asking the robots for help because they have not been taught otherwise. The robots also continuously feed people liquid drinks, whereas a parent would eventually transition a baby to solid food. The people on the Axiom are trapped in an endless infancy because their parents promote stagnation by continuing to treat them as babies. They continue to ask for the same “help” from the robots because it is all they know to do, since the robots fail to push them into independence and instead coddle them. There is also a clear lack of a parent-child relationship, which is typically the first intimate relationship in one’s life. When technology becomes a parent, it lacks face-to-face interaction with its children, as demonstrated in the scene where John mistakes WALL-E for a service robot and tries to hand him his cup. John does not even glance over at WALL-E throughout the interaction until he starts falling out of his chair. The lack of eye

contact and connection shows how the humans and robots aboard the Axiom typically interact; the robots care for humans, but the humans rarely have any meaningful exchange with them. Another woman is shown demanding a drink by saying “bot, over here” and opening and closing her hand, without ever turning to look at the robot. A parent feeding a child is typically one of the foundations of intimacy and trust, but when technology is the parent, every interaction is cold and mechanical, as demonstrated by the demanding and unfeeling tone of the woman’s voice. Furthermore, the robots are programmed to mimic the emotional support provided by a parent, but the robots fail as parents because they only simulate affection. For instance, *WALL-E* shows a short scene where women are getting their hair and makeup done by robots, and the robots have mother-like voices, saying things like “ugh, men” and calling the women “honey” as they pamper them. While the audio sounds like a meaningful experience, the women don’t even look at the robots, but still stare at their screens while their hair and makeup are done. This reveals that they don’t feel enough of a connection to the robots to even look at them. When technology replaces parents, meaningful moments like a mother styling her daughter’s hair become mechanical and forced. In order to develop, children need both a push towards independence and an intimate relationship with the parent, so having technology as a parent can only produce maladjusted children who never grow up.



When technology parents us and leaves us in a cycle of dependence, we lose our sense of purpose. While technology is a symbol of progress, it can also hinder us from progressing because it makes us comfortable with complacency and puts everything we could ask for at our fingertips. Without something to strive for, people feel useless, as demonstrated in *WALL-E*. The captain laments to Auto, the robot who controls the ship, “I can’t just sit here and do nothing. That’s all I’ve ever done. That’s all anyone on this blasted ship has ever done.” By calling the ship “blasted,” the captain directs his frustration towards the Axiom, which is representative of the lifestyle humans have in space. While he doesn’t know exactly what he wants to do, the captain feels restless and wants more in his life, which is why he is overtaken with excitement over the discovery of life on Earth. Similarly, one passenger asks another man via screen communication what he wants to do for entertainment, and the man responds “I don’t know. Something.” This highlights the people’s desire to do something other than sit and be waited on. Since the people on the Axiom have likely had robots as teachers their whole lives – encouraging them to sit and do nothing – it is clear that the desire for purpose is natural rather than taught. No one can describe exactly what they are feeling, but the people in *WALL-E* know that something is missing from their lives. Having technology as a parent doesn’t only leave people restless because they have nothing to do – it also causes emptiness because people no longer have to take care of each other. Even though Frank is not completely parented by his robot, this idea is seen in *Robot and Frank* when Madison confesses to Frank, “I just want to help you. I don’t know what to do.” Her father has begun to prefer robot’s care, so she no longer feels that she has a role and is unsure how to interact with Frank. When technology becomes a parent, people no longer have to take care of themselves or of their own children, leaving everyone with a sense of emptiness.

Modern films show us that when we allow technology to become embedded in our lives, it can start to take care of us. In some cases, we become like children with technology as our parent, but technology fails as a parent because it prevents people from growing up and leaves them feeling useless. While films about technology showcase its detriments, they also highlight the hope for change. *WALL-E* ends with humanity returning to Earth, and people are seen starting to “grow up” by walking, interacting with each other face to face, and taking ownership of their own lives. *Robot and Frank* shows Frank realizing that the robot cannot fill his relationship needs, returning to the love of his family for comfort, and being put in a full-time care facility where he is taken care of by other people. “Parenthood” - being representative of real life - ends however we decide. With the knowledge that our technology has the possibility to gradually come to fill the role of a parent in our lives, will we allow it to do so, or will we step in the other direction towards a brighter future?

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