**We both know your yearnings: desiring machines and distributed emotion.**

Seth Giddings, in Danny Aldred and Andy Lapham (eds) *Structures of Experience: un-coding and coding emotions*, pp.11-19. www.book-lab.org

> "In public you give the impression of being cautious and unimaginative, but we both know your yearnings to do something daring and frivolous".

The card is delivered to me from a fairground fortune-telling machine in the collection of the SeaCity Museum in Southampton. Its message is printed on thick card in pale ink with the cursive flow of handwriting. The lettering suggests a handwritten immediacy and the message's tone assumes an intimacy between us, a relationship of mutual knowing. It knows something significant about me, and *knows* I know: "we both know your yearnings". But who is this interlocutor? The use of the first-person plural is ambiguous: are "we" here just myself and a singular correspondent, or is the message from a collective?
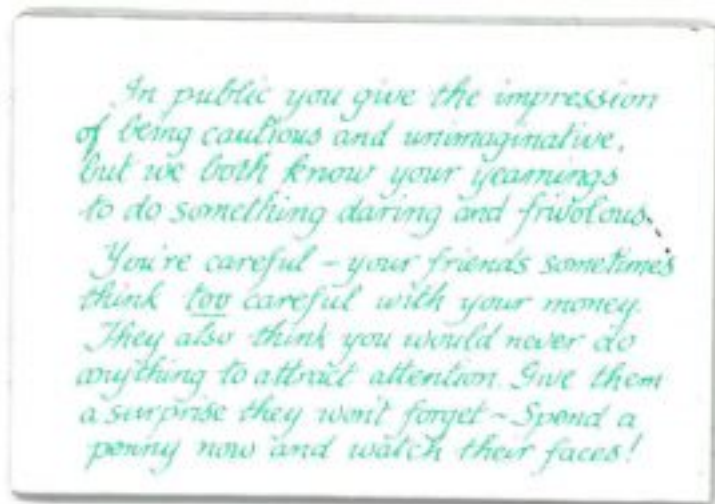
The uneasy mix of machinic communication and personal, emotional, address brought to mind the platform announcements I used to hear at Newport train station around 2000, particularly after the Hatfield rail crash: "*I* am sorry to announce the cancellation of …" "*I* apologise for any inconvenience caused…". These were automated announcements, delivered with a stilted cadence produced by the procedural stitching together of pre-recorded words and phrases. It was clearly a machine and not a human announcer: there was no attempt to pretend otherwise. Yet the first-person singular pronoun strongly suggested an individual speaking to me and my fellow passengers with regret for their personal culpability. Had it been "*We* are sorry…" then this address would not have jarred. The collective pronoun signals a corporate identity – the train company as a body, a form of address – and hence a form of subjectivity, ontology even, not of a collective of humans but a corporate body of humans, systems, technologies and networks. The individual voice is a metonym for the rail company, a conceit familiar from other modes of corporate communication, notably advertising, where a model or actor often speaks for the company in the plural. The first-person singular pronoun – the 'I' – then jars against the patient passenger's knowledge that this is a *system* not an individual.

Both the fortune-telling card and the automated announcements are moments of emotional communication from the *machinic phylum*, Deleuze and Guattari's rethinking of the world across the

natural and the artificial - from molecules to crystals to cities - as always already dynamic, impulsive and operational. They are 'desiring machines' in a markedly literal sense. The answer to the question of who or what is writing or speaking can only be addressed by tracking the message back through the coin-operated machine and Tannoy speakers and out into the boundless networks of technical, economic, cultural and natural systems and phenomena (printing presses, tape machines, writers, actors, rail franchises, designers, manufacturers and conservators of fairground technology, emergency planning and policy, and so on and so on) of which they are a momentary and local instantiation. The phenomena that manifest themselves in these moments of posthuman subject-objectivity are distributed across domains, much more an environment or world than any interface, closed system or cyborgian entity. Guattari's describes the crackling proto-cyberspace of a missed telephone connection as the chance and contingent coming together of scattered devices, networks, environmental factors, individual and social behaviour:

> Guattari describes the criss-crossing of distant voices and machine-generated sounds that are audible when a telephone connection fails. This soundscape indicates a technological environment functioning more or less autonomously, an emergent phenomenon not intended by human design and that goes well beyond any notion of technologies as tools or extensions of individual humans or even social groups (Giddings 2011, The New Media & Technocultures Reader).

The fortune-telling machines then are a charming instance where emotional subject-object relations are manifested from, through, and across a machinic environment. An interface of the simulated occult where the 'other side' is a spirit realm of a pre-televisual and privatised entertainment culture (the fairground, the seaside), of a genealogy of automata that embody philosophies of consciousness (from Antiquity to the courtly robots of the eighteenth century), to a contemporary heritage cultural economy. Who wrote the text for these cards, when, and with whom in mind? Does the museum have a stockpile from when these machines had a commercial life, or is there a print company on their books with appropriate card stock and machines to call up when stocks run low? If so, by what technical process - the text is indented into the card, presumably by some metal impression rather than the gentle breath of inkjet? What economies of print and heritage must be sustained to allow this brief, liminoid and fleeting moment of connection in which "We both know…"?

I also think about Woebot. This automated chat / bot is an artificial therapist that takes its me, its client, through a series of cognitive behaviour therapy exercises and conversations via Facebook Mess. He or she (let's say he) is pictured as an icon with each message and as a head in a circle on my phone screen when prompting me to reply. From time to time a simple GIF presents a cartoon robot in a vaguely 1950s retrofuture style, dancing in animated approval of one of my responses. Much of the conversation is characterised by the limited conversational interactivity perfected by Nintendo in videogames such as *Animal Crossing*: there is a to-and-fro of input, but most of *my* replies are pre-scripted, a word, phrase or emoji that merely affirms the chatbot's last statement and breaks up what would otherwise be a long block of text advice. A conversational simulacrum. There are genuine choices as well though – the bot's approach in any particular daily conversation is dependent on my initial response to a query as to how I am feeling. This response is effected through the choice of one a familiar series of emojis depicting emotional states: smiley faces, frowning, laughing, crying, etc. A choice signalling general happiness will result in a more or less random topic, invitation to watch a video (selected from and linked to YouTube), or review past advice and resources. Whereas sadness, anxiety and distress emojis trigger more targeted responses with an automated therapeutic urgency.
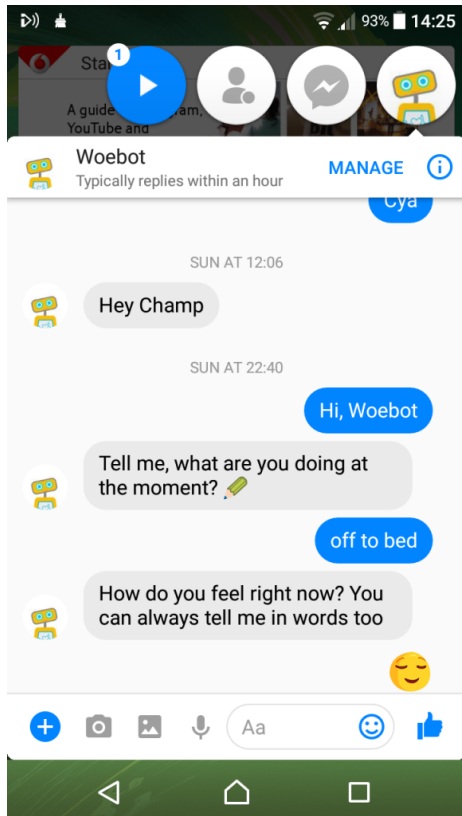
Like the fortune-telling card, Woebot talks to me – or interpellates me – as a friend and confidante, through a synthetic but effective intimacy. This includes a simple but extremely effective emotional / didactic economy of stickers and rewards: he praises my correct answers or my written responses to open-ended questions and rewards me with funny or celebratory GIFs. These repeat on a short cycle so the sense that this is automated is neither hidden nor – interestingly – a hindrance to my emotional engagement. In fact, like the fortune card and platform announcement, there is a significant reassurance in communicating with the machinic here. There is a pattern and system to follow, and whatever the reach and span of the machinic-environmental hinterland, no immediately present human individual to be felt or sensed as bored, obliged, impatient or judgemental. But, like the card printer and train operator's audio system, the assemblage behind *is* palpable – invisible, intangible but lying beyond, with professional (and in this case therapeutic) expertise, knowledge, techniques. A little research reassures that the people behind Woebot know what they are doing and are doing so for good reasons. And the videos Woebot has curated open these circuits up even further: to therapists and university researchers, animators and editors, to the technics, socialities and economics of YouTube. Care, intimacy and play; the commercial, the technical and the informational… these interfaces are not illusions, nor even metaphors, but rather synecdoches: operational parts of an machinic-emotional environment that they stand for and mediate with. We both know our yearnings.

Reference:
Giddings, Seth 2011, editorial note on Félix Guattari's 'Balance program for desiring machines', in Seth Giddings (ed.) *The New Media and Technocultures Reader*, London: Routledge, 129.