

Are We Falling in Love With Robots?

By Michael Dempsey, *BBC*, August 8, 2022

Cristiane Bonifacio has just extracted a large chocolate bar from the robot that has rolled up outside her home. Ms Bonifacio is in a hurry and has to dash back indoors for a work Zoom call, but she's got just enough time to express her affection for the robot delivery service that sends these machines scuttling along her local pavements.

5 "I love the robots. Sometimes you find one that's got stuck so you help it and it says 'thank you'."

The robot delivery service from Starship Technologies was launched in Milton Keynes four years ago and has been steadily expanding ever since, with further towns added just last month.

10 After decades of playing the villain in science fiction, robots are now part of life in many towns and people haven't just embraced them, they rush to assist them. What is going on?

Amber Case is an Oregon-based specialist in human-robot interaction and the way technology changes everyday life. "In the movies robots are always a technology that's attacking us. But the delivery robots wait for us and we use them."

15 She thinks occasions when a robot hits an obstacle and requires help from a passer-by are a crucial part of the human-robot relationship. "Technology can be adorable if it needs our assistance. We like a robot that needs us a bit, and when we help the robot it creates a bond."

Curiously, Ms Case is critical of the Starship Technologies delivery robots that pepper the pavements of Milton Keynes.

20 They are battery-powered, summoned and opened by an app, equipped with sensors to detect pedestrians and armed with a speaker. This allows a remote human operator to address people observed through on-board video cameras.

Yet this arsenal of tech is not being applied correctly, she says. "I feel they are automating the wrong part of the journey. Humans are really good at negotiating terrain and finding a
25 particular house. Is this just a fetish for automating things?"

Despite these reservations she concedes that "the Starship team have gone about it the right way, understanding how to make sure it's not scary, but cute. It seems they think more about the design than some robot makers and a well-designed robot is more likely to succeed."

30 The human-robot bond emerging in Milton Keynes has banished the stereotype of a menacing robot, says one inhabitant.

"When you see one you don't get that science-fiction emotion of 'Oh No! It's a robot!' It's more like a cute little character you see on the street. It makes your walk more colourful."

Andy Curtis, Starship's UK operations manager, talks about each machine operating in a
35 "bubble of awareness" that allows it to alert people to its presence and offer thanks if they assist it. "It's designed to be cute, not to be invasive."