

Chapter 3 Discovery

Uncle Charlie was a marketing manager for a software company delivering voice recognition and call center software. In his job, Charlie was constantly exposed to new products that both his company and the competitors would produce. Charlie was expected to keep current on the technology, so he reserved time daily to read articles and briefs that were circulated among his staff and colleagues. One day, while reading an article about the future of technology, ethics, and integration of humans and robots, he stumbled across a program that drew his interest. A trial program on a new interactive robot was introduced by the company WhyRobot. The new robot employed a heterogeneous computation system using both an AI neural processor as well as standard microprocessor capabilities. The article explained that this new robot was a new class called “Companion Robot,” intended to be a friend and provide dimensions of therapy and comfort to its users. This is something that even the most sophisticated toy robots lack today. The article used words and phrases like “bonding to its human”, “providing watchdog safety for those concerned”, and being “discrete, ethical”, and “highly connected”.

Charlie was very intrigued. “Was this the friend that Robbie so desperately needed?” thought Charlie. Charlie continued his investigation using the web. He googled the company “WhyRobot”, which turned out to be an advanced robot company with multiple lines. The “Companion Robot” program was still under the technology development arm of the company and the website led Charlie directly to the overview of the trial program. Here is what the abstract said.

WhyRobot Companion Robot Program

We at WhyRobot are continuously striving to improve the lives of others through the application of advanced robotics. To date, robots have been utilitarian in consumer, industry, and civil applications. Robots have also been an intriguing toy bringing joy for young and old alike. Unfortunately, toys have limited application and use. Eventually, the users grow weary of them and they often get left behind. A Companion Robot is different. This robot evolves and grows with you. It has a sophisticated computation system incorporating an advanced AI neural processor that has been structured to interact with humans in a much different way than previous robots. A Companion Robot, with proper bonding and training, will engage with its users emotionally and have spontaneous interactions. The user will have a much deeper experience and will develop relational bonds that go far beyond what even the most sophisticated robots have achieved to date. A Companion Robot comes preprogrammed with an ethics framework that keeps privacy and safety at the forefront of the relationship. Since the robot has unprecedented access to the user's life, emotions, interactions, and discoveries, the Companion Robot employs strict security and safety measures that the user and configuration operator can establish. Since the Companion Robot is expected to be in use for years, the developed neural state, responses, and learned behaviors can be transferred to a new robot body, allowing the personality that has evolved over years to be preserved and carried forward. Because the Companion Robot unleashes a whole new paradigm of machine and human interaction, we have established this trial program to see how successful such a robot can be in establishing strong human relationships and providing value to

its users. If you're interested in joining our Companion Robot Program, please contact us using the form below.

Uncle Charlie read on, drilling into all the details on the program, the robot's capabilities, and expectations for users and configuration operators. This was a perfect gift for Robbie, except for one thing. The program required parental consent for a Companion Robot to be given to a minor. The terms of use warned that if this was violated that it was under penalty of law. WhyRobot was so careful about this that they required a birth certificate, proving the parent and minor's relationship. "How am I going to get sis to agree to this?" thought Charlie. Charlie stewed on this for a bit and then suddenly a confident smile came across his face. "I know just how to get sis to say yes to this idea!", thought Charlie to himself, "piece of cake".

Charlie asked Chelsea to meet him over coffee. It was Sunday afternoon; Frank was playing golf and Robbie was over at a friend's house watching scary movies. It was Halloween and soon there would be trick or treaters in all the neighborhoods later today. For now, it was just a quiet October afternoon. Charlie thought he'd break the ice first. "How is it going, sis?" Charlie asked with a sympathetic tone in his voice.

"I'm ok," she responded. She hesitated and then continued, "Actually, I'm not really that ok. Robbie has been acting up in school and has been very isolated lately. We hardly talk anymore, and we seemed to have drifted apart after Sam's death and the marriage. I see that he does not like Frank and when Frank sees it, he responds badly. Frank starts yelling and barking orders at both of us and the house gets very uncomfortable. I think Frank is jealous of how Robbie misses his dad and Robbie refuses to engage with Frank to play games or go anywhere fun. About the only activity he'll do with Frank is go watch drone racing down at the old factory."

Charlie paused for a minute and decided to make his pitch. "I've noticed Robbie's poor attitude and demeanor and I've been wondering how I could be of help."

Chelsea jumped in, "Oh Charlie, he loves you and he's always talking about what fun he has with you. Please, let me know what you are thinking."

"Well," Charlie started up again, "I've been doing some research on new robots that are becoming available and there's a new robot program coming from a company called WhyRobot." Chelsea's attention sparked and her eyes were fixed on Charlie. "It's called a Companion Robot. They have new technology that lets the robot interact deeper with users and the robot will evolve and grow with Robbie. I was thinking of enrolling Robbie into the program and being his sponsor, which they call the Configuration Operator. Since the robot interacts intimately with a child, the company requires full consent of the guardian, so you would need to agree and provide a birth certificate to prove you're his mother."

Chelsea thought for a bit and decided she needed to ask a few more questions. "Its just a robot toy, right? Why are they being so strict?" she said with a slightly stressed voice.

Charlie knew this was the critical point, so he was very careful in revealing just the right information. "You can think of the robot like it was a therapy dog. It has the ability to learn and sense your emotions and engage in comforting you. It will say sympathetic phrases like 'I'm sorry you're feeling sad.' or suggest stuff like 'Is there any way to cheer you up? Can we play a game?'. The program gives us the robot for a reduced price but requires us to fill out a few surveys in the first year and then one every year after that for five years. With that level of interaction, you can see why they want parental consent."

Chelsea paused for a moment and said, "Is there a downside?"

Charlie responded quickly as he'd thought through this question before, "The only downside is that Robbie will likely have this robot with him everywhere he goes. If I know Robbie, he'll want it with him all the time."

"I think its fine," Chelsea responded, "Robbie needs a happy distraction, and this will be good. When were you thinking of giving it to him?"

Charlie paused in amazement, "Sis, his birthday is in two weeks. I was going to give it then."

Chelsea's eyes got wide. "Oh shit! I completely forgot. What are we going to do about his birthday? Oh my, I can't believe I forgot my own son's birthday. There has been just so much stuff going on."

"It will be ok sis, you have time still," He said in a comforting voice. "Hey sis, this whole thing about needing the birth certificate and your consent for the robot, I don't think you should involve Frank. He's not a legal guardian and we don't need him to get jealous about it. From Frank's perspective, I'll be giving Robbie a cool robot and that's that. Ok?"

Chelsea nodded. "I agree. Its already complicated enough without getting Frank involved in it as well. Just let me know when you need the stuff."

Charlie concluded, "It will all be online. I will register your email; they will send you a request to upload a picture of the certificate and give your consent. Thanks sis! I think this will be awesome for Robbie. I have to run, so take care and say Hi to Frank and Robbie for me." With that, Charlie hugged Chelsea and left.

Chelsea sat for a bit and said to herself, "How can a mother forget her own child's birthday?" She dropped her head into her hands and started to cry.