

**TECH**

**Cyber-twins deputise for the real McCoy**

Nick Miller  
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An Australian company has begun populating cyberspace with artificially intelligent "cyber-twins" of bloggers, social networkers and even corporate PR. MyCyberTwin is a new venture from the team that took on the giants of search with its personalised Mooter search engine.

Visitors to the MyCyberTwin site can create an artificially intelligent counterpart, giving it a list of personality traits and conversation topics. The CyberTwin then embeds in any other internet site - a blog, corporate home, virtual world or social network such as MySpace - to act as a "deputy" when the flesh-and-blood person is not online.

Visitors can enter an online conversation with the CyberTwin, asking questions or just passing the time of day. When the real person comes back online they can review all the conversations their twin has conducted. Liesl Capper, chief executive and co-founder of MyCyberTwin, says the company is in talks with a "very large media company" and "a major player in instant messaging" about embedding its software in their sites.

Some corporations are experimenting with the software as part of their corporate brand experiences online, to liven up webpages and provide personality to a marketing campaign without paying for real people to interact online.

"You can design the twin to be curious, to find out about customers," Ms Capper says. "You can program it with answers to questions in your FAQ. For bloggers, it is about engaging with an audience."

In future, it will also be able to relay RSS news feeds. It could even be used to populate virtual worlds such as Second Life.

"Vast virtual worlds are emerging and social networks are evolving into virtual environments which are about meeting people - but a lot of these environments feel empty," Ms Capper says. "MyCyberTwin is part of a trend of 'progressive embodiment' in the digital world, as more of the self goes online."

Ms Capper and partner Dr John Zakos designed the software based on artificial intelligence research going back 40 years to Eliza, a program mimicking a therapist. The creator of Eliza was said to have switched it off in horror after people started relating to the program as if it were human and telling it their life stories.

More recently, researchers have created complex artificial personalities such as the "artificial linguistic entity" A.L.I.C.E. and Jabberwacky.

Ms Capper says A.L.I.C.E. and contemporaries were too limited. "(They) end up as single types of personalities, so it's not really scalable. MyCyberTwin is much more dynamic because you can choose different base personalities."

The company will charge for use of the CyberTwins. Casual users get 500 free conversations a month, but after that users must pay to keep their twin chatting.

**LINKS**

- [www.mycybertwin.com](http://www.mycybertwin.com)
- [www.mooter.com](http://www.mooter.com)



MyCyberTwin co-founder Liesl Capper.

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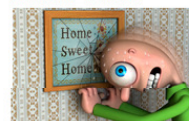
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