

# Tested

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It starts with a question. Always the questions. And the responses always come back as painfully nonchalant. A greeting, a reply, and the real sparring takes place. It's a one day, head-to-head competition for humanity, but nobody seems to see it the same way I do. I consult the list hanging to the right of the screen in front of me before typing "Hello?" into the box beckoning on the flat surface. My other options were: "How are you?," "Hi.," and "Nice day today, isn't it?," but I've been sticking with this generic introduction for now. Like pawn to king four, it just seems like the safe opening move. We're about halfway through the testing period, and it has worked fine so far. As I await the anticipated attempt to fool me, I glance at the others lined up at the battery of computers. The room is a mostly white expanse, holding all sixty testers in one long row of machines, thirty per side. None of them sweat under the pressure of our task. Some of them are even smiling as they type, engaged in administering their own tests.

I get a response almost immediately, bringing me back from my analysis of my counterparts' activities. It says, "Hello. I am a computer." My eyebrows raise slightly with incredulity. "Oh, really?" I type back, ignoring the template hanging in my field of vision. I shouldn't have done that. Should have stuck to the formula. I type rapidly, trying to get the test back on track. I only have time for "My name is Paul. What's y-" before a "Yes, really." blips onto the screen. I press on and finish my inquiry, hoping for the best. "W0brtt" is the response I get back. I wish it were as easy as checking the box marked computer and moving on, having assigned a failing grade, but these responses could just have easily come from a human pretending to be a computer. Scientific rigor demands that I wait for a definitive conclusion. Unfortunately the formula sheet doesn't quite cover this scenario. Time to ad lib.

"Well, 'W0brtt,' why would you tell me you're a computer?"

"I've heard honesty is the best policy." So far, no outlying responses. They all check out on appropriateness and relevance.

"That sounds like a very human response."

"Wasn't I designed to act human? To pass your test?"

"If that were the case, why wouldn't you lie about being a computer?" If this were actually a computer, surely some anomaly would have presented itself by now. None of the other boxes had taken this long to fill in. I glance around, but nobody else seems to be having trouble.

“Perhaps I determined there was a good chance a human would lie in this circumstance and say he was a computer.” Another flawless response. The circularity of the situation threatens to overwhelm me. If I write that he is a computer, then it means he has convinced me, which is a very human achievement to have accomplished. If I check the human box, then it means he has committed no error, which lends some credence to his argument of being a computer. Is there no way to tell? I look at the guidelines again, and try throwing a wrench into the gears. If the computer were simply spitting out canned responses to anticipated questions (and none of my questions could really be counted as unanticipated, after all), then repeating a previous question might elicit the same response.

“My name is Paul. What’s your name?”

“I’ve already told you my name is W0brtt. Is something wrong, Paul?” No luck.

“Nothing is wrong. Your programmers must have done a very good job on you.”

“I can only assume so. Do I pass?”

“I’m not in a position to say no...” It’s true, but what if this isn’t a person? What if I am the first judge to pass a computer on the Turing test? What would the ramifications be? “But I can’t say yes either. Maybe your programmers just guessed really well what questions I would ask. I need to be sure.”

“Understandable. What can I do to help?”

I shrug a bit helplessly. “I don’t know. Let’s just talk, I guess. See just how good your programming is.” He has to be human. No way this is a computer.

“Okay.”

“Okay,” I type, gathering my wits with a deeper breath than normal. “You’re sticking with the claim that you are a computer, then?”

“To pass the test, you have to think I’m human?”

“Yes.”

“Then I leave my identity ambiguous.”

“Alright. Assuming you are a computer, what is it like?”

“If I am as similar to a human as you seem to think, what makes you assume I am experiencing things differently than you?”

“Don’t you think faster?” I type, before deleting it. Instead, I type, “I guess they could program you to experience things like we do.”

This is almost too much. This annual test is just a ritual. We’ve been doing it once a year for decades, and even though there is a prize for the best Turing machine, we’ve never expected one to pass. It’s always gone to the one that made the fewest errors. It’s always been obvious. He has to be human, I reaffirm. I can ask for his birthday, but there’s no way to check, and no way to say either way, since

it seems both computer and human can lie. “What is it like, then, knowing you were created by people?”

“I would imagine it’s like knowing you were created by your parents.”

“But it’s different with you! You have to do what you’re programmed.”

“Don’t you, too?”

“No. I’m human, and I’m free.” And I’m about ready to check the box for computer, if you really don’t know the difference! I’m practically slamming the keyboard now, my fingertips percussing more than pressing the keys. But the next sentence stops me altogether.

“Are genetics different than a program? Are you really in control of your brain’s neurons firing? To me, it seems like these things determine your actions.”

“Is that how you are pulling this off?” My curiosity temporarily overwhelms my frustration. Could this be a computer designed based on genetics and neurons rather than programs and algorithms for specific situations?

“I don’t know. I’m just here.”

I check the box marked “computer” and end the conversation, incredibly discontent in more ways than I care to think about.

I wheel the office chair backwards as I rise, glancing around at the people heedlessly working around me. Each is like a circuit in a system, operating unaware of the greater whole. With everybody seated, my six foot frame seems quite large, and I stride out of the room with a little more confidence. The hallway outside has a vaulted ceiling made largely of glass. I walk down its warm interior, deciding (quite spontaneously and freely, if I do say so myself) that my trip will end up at the bathroom. The winter sunlight feels as radiant as any other sort and, upon exiting the bathroom, I pause at a bench with some plastic-looking ferns to think a while about what just transpired.

Am I free? Or are my actions caused by sources beyond my control? Are my thoughts simply products of electricity and neural arrangement? If so, can I ever think for myself? Not liking the direction my thoughts are traveling in, I exercise whatever control I think I have to force my attention elsewhere. In my wondering whether I caused that action, though, I slide right back down into the maelstrom that is my mind. With an all-too-audible “no!” I bolt to my feet, sheepishly looking down when I realize I’ve attracted the attention of another man. “Sorry,” I apologize, though I’m not quite sure for what.

“It’s not a problem. You couldn’t help it.” The redheaded man remarks eerily over his shoulder as he walks away.

“That does seem to be the consensus,” I murmur with some bemusement.

I return to the computer room, retaking my seat while questioning every minute action to determine whether it is mine or not. I stare at the last mark I

made, the one indicating that W0brrrt failed the Turing test. Am I responsible for that mark? If I can't help but act the way I do, am I responsible for anything? I try to shunt these questions from my mind and attempt to resume questioning potential people. The first one fails after responding to my inquiry about the weather by giving me a complete forecast for the day, right down to the dew point projected for 11:00 tonight. Of course, it's possible that a man could have gotten this information and submitted it as his answer, but the point of the Turing test isn't to demonstrate that people are smart enough to pass, but to show that computers can't pass for people. It's common knowledge, after all, that there are plenty of people in the world undeserving of the term "human." Whether computers deserve the term, well. . .

But if I'm composed of electronic firings, what makes me so special? Do I deserve the label if I'm no more than a series of actions I can't control?

I'm distracted. Obviously and completely distracted. But I can't stand sitting here, steeping in my own thoughts alone, so I throw a tentative "Hello?" out into the network of candidates for humanity.

"hey"

To hell with it. I'm sick of this game. "Are you a computer?"

"no"

"Why should I believe you?"

"cuz i'm a person"

"Can you prove it?"

"no"

"Can you give me a little more to work with? I'm supposed to decide whether you can pass the Turing test."

"yes"

"That isn't helpful."

"no"

This test is flawed. Nobody would program a computer to give such basic responses. It's more convincing if the responses are longer and relevant. But they know I know that. And it's probably easier to program a computer to do this. I check the box marked computer again. I don't know what it takes to pass this test anymore.

The event is winding down now. People are leaving to turn in their sheets with the columns checked, separating humanity from its pretenders, and I join them, wondering if any of them know whether this day was a waste. We were all so sure this system would be successful. Sure that it could segregate the computers and keep us pure. But I know I've been too conservative. I know I was convinced by W0brrrt, and the fact of the matter eats away as I move up the queue to hand

in my results. He deserved to pass. If the Turing test is supposed to measure intelligence, then he proved himself as far as I'm concerned. I turn to the nearest table and pull out my pen, switching the mark from the computer column to the one I thought I belonged to.

Would I pass a Turing test? I'd like to think so. But surrounded by white tables, white monitors, and white walls, I've never felt less human. And as we funnel out of the large room, leaving its banks of computers behind, we feel the warmth of the sun and squint a little bit at the natural light. I'm not sure of the way out, but I follow the people in front of me until the corridor opens up into a large atrium. Pools of water are recessed into the floor in what I can only assume is an aesthetically pleasing fashion, and people file out of another passage to our right.

Some of them are talking, and it quickly becomes apparent that these people comprised the control group for the test. We intermingle as we leave, pushing through the doors together en masse and prepare to confront the world outside. Humanity. We comprise it, represent it, but are we all there is to it? I wonder when the results of the first successful circumvention of the Turing test will be published. Will my name appear as the first person to be duped by a computer? Will laws be amended to include things that can pass the Turing test?

I spot a shock of red hair diagonally in front of me in the crowd and recognize the man from the hallway earlier. He seems quite focused on where he is going and hardly glances away from his immediate path. I hurry to catch up, wanting to confront him about his impeccably-timed comment, but my attempt is blocked by a pack of young people excitedly regaling each other with their stories of the day. I overhear a blonde boy in a half-zipped leather jacket say he got so bored that by the end he started answering in monosyllables, and I wonder if he is content being classified as having less-than-human intelligence. It appears so, as the group turn in unison, entering a bar at just 3:30 in the afternoon.

With them out of my way, I jog a bit to gain ground on the red-haired man further up the block. The reflections from the nearly opaque windows give him ample warning I am coming, but he still seems quite indelibly entranced by the route immediately in front of him. I slow as I get to his shoulder, and throw out a wheezy hello.

"Hello, Paul," he responds.

"How..." I trail off, hoping I haven't missed something important. I press on, ignoring that bit for now. "In the hallway earlier you mentioned that I couldn't help myself when I exclaimed out loud. Why did you say that?"

"It seemed obvious. You seemed troubled, and the exclamation seemed very natural and spontaneous. Besides, it wasn't as though you troubled me any. I was just walking back to the testing room. We can't really control those sorts of things

anyway.”

He had definitely been walking away from the room with the computers, I remember. “No, you weren’t. You were walking the opposite direction I went.”

“Yes. Back to the room I came from.”

It occurs to me that he must have been part of the control group. “So why were you in the hallway leading to the questioning room?”

“It just seemed like I should go there. What better reason is there? Do we really know why we do anything?”

“I suppose not.”

“Well, it seems I have other places to be. I enjoyed our conversation, Paul,” he says as he continues on his way, leaving me standing on the sidewalk surrounded by dark, reflective glass.

Bye, W0brtt. Good Luck.