

Claire Weizenegger  
cweiz@uw.edu

James Pierce IxD Chair  
Audrey Desjardins IxD Committee

Master of Design  
University of Washington



"Hey, Siri Are you here to serve my needs?"  
Yes! I'm your assistant 24/7.  
"Do you work for me?"  
That's right you're the boss around here.

VAs are  
"GIRL"  
SERVIST!

# MAID, FRIEND, OR MASTER?

Exploring the relationships between **Ethics, Design, Personification** and domestic **Voice Assistants**

My Thesis is a critical inquiry centered around the personification of domestic Voice Assistants (e.g., Siri, Alexa, and co). As many scholars observe, the projection of the 24/7 available nursing yet submissive female assistant into technology **reinforces** hurtful gender biases and contributes to greater inequality while actively shaping moral values. Using a research through design (RtD) approach, I propose different ways of designing and interacting with domestic VAs.

## Insights

- 1 Female voice (by default) is not the main problem. Making smart devices "gender neutral" with a new name or deeper voice doesn't address their deep-seated sexism.
- 2 VAs are designed and engineered to represent certain female values that lead to interaction moments that conceptualize an Assistant - Boss relationship and other submissive servant tasks.
- 3 Anthropomorphism applied to technology can lead to (false) emotional ties between humans and machines.
- 4 The conceptualization of an Assistant should be **anceled** because of its association with traditional gender norms.

## The Design Direction

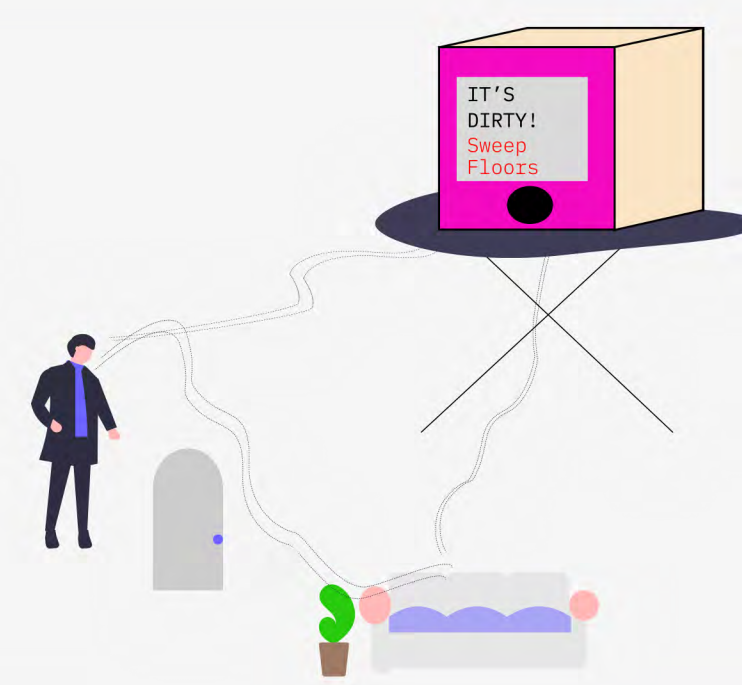
Within the RtD tradition, I use design proposals, sketches, scenarios, and prototypes to reconsider and critically reflect upon current norms of design and interaction with domestic VAs. The focus lies on Speculative, Discursive, Critical and **thing-centered** design.

I ask myself, how could a domestic conversation technology look like that **occupies roles** in their everyday life **outside of consumption?** Away from social norms and performing subservient tasks. That speaks to you in ways that teach you what is going on in the world. Influenced by *Peter-Paul Verbeek's Mediation theory*: **establishing relations between the user and their environment.**

### The Honest Guest

Thing centered

Dominant voice interface that is brutally honest and gives you tasks instead of a "helper" or "servant" thing. For example, it could remind you of chores at home, taking care of yourself, go out into nature. Perhaps a secret to a happy life cube for the lonely man without a wife - or simply an honest guest. This voice interface challenges the submissive servant characteristics of VAs.



### The Caregiving Companion

Helper tool

Work in pairs: the other lights up whenever one person is talking. To use it, both people must engage equally - in talk and balance. A proactive therapist voice interface that initiates deep, difficult conversations and works through human touch. Moreover, it encourages its user to take better care of themselves.

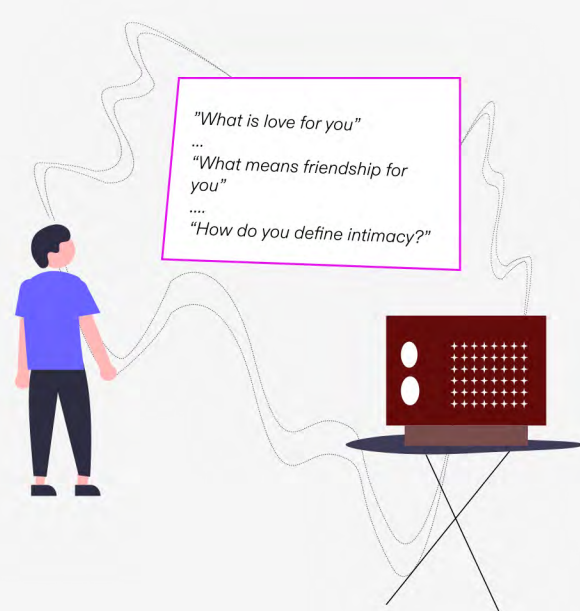


### The Platonic Friend

Companion tool

Voice interface tool that is centered around creating an intimate relationship with its interactor. Influenced by the "Socrates irony" tool asks its interactor about definitions.

Topics include justice, morals, love, friendship, and intimacy means. Every conversation ends with no answer (or more questions) about what justice, morality, love, friendship, and intimacy mean.



### The Argue Machine

Thing centered

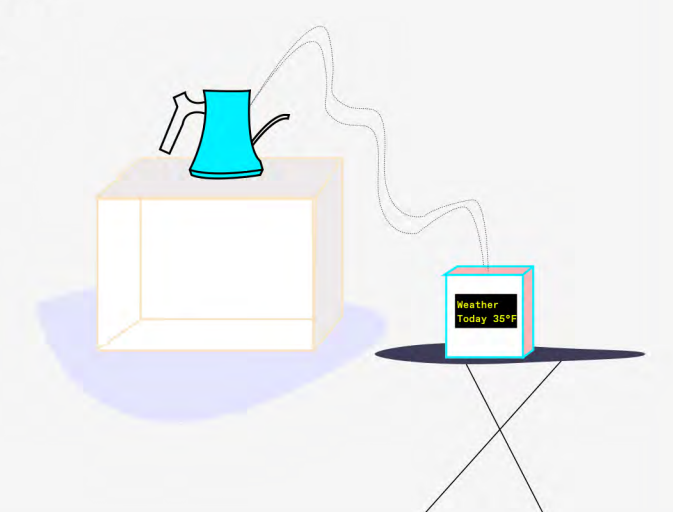
Voice machine that argues all the time. The object is trained on object-oriented ontology, e.g.; objects are more than their "actions". This time-intensive, frustrating device prompts its user experience and reflection on their interaction with other contemporary domestic VAs. It could also work as an object that shows the secret life of another object within the surrounding. How much oxygen does a plant take while gone? How much energy does the kettle use while gone?



### The Needy Artifact

Awareness towards the environment around us

Voice active interface that only works when it's placed near another product in your Apartment. Equipped with sensors that sense electromagnetic fields, the object facilitates different conversations depending on the object nearby. Also, there is no trigger word, and the sensor detects you and will ask you a question before you can interact with it.



Share your thoughts here

### In Alignment with the Universe

Thing centered

An artifact trained in the philosophy of wuwei (Chinese: "non-action"; literally, "no action"), the practice of not doing anything that is not consistent with the natural course of the universe. Certain skills are associated with a particular time. For example, the weather can only be inquired about before 8 am. If one misses that time, one must wait 24 hours before the desired skill can be used. If you ask more than one question at a time the object stops working. Puts emphasis on the agency of objects with the hope to encourage meaningful interactions.

