

Trash-talking Scrabble player is robot named Victor

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(Phys.org) —Students at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh have created a Scrabble-playing robot who is quite remarkable, not because it plays well but because it does not play well, and talks with all the human signs of a sneering winner and a sore loser. This robot is Victor, who has been sitting in the school's computer science lounge playing Scrabble with any human who can accommodate Victor's jokes and jibes.

The robot was designed and developed under the guidance of Carnegie

Mellon under the supervision of Reid Simmons, a robotics professor who began working with Victor in 2009, as a test for how robots can interact with humans in a more pal-like way. The concern is that, if robots are to interact with humans in instances such as home assistance, the goal in robotics should be to design machines that can interact more successfully than toasters and blenders. *The Wall Street Journal's* James Hagerty visited the professor and Victor's Scrabble-playing scene; his report was published earlier this month along with a video.

Victor's head is a box-shaped screen on a fiberglass body. The Scrabble table consists of a touch-screen Scrabble board where people move tiles by swiping their fingers across the [screen](#). "Victor sits at one end of the table; he is a robot with a face and a body, no arms, a fiberglass shell; he can look around," said Simmons. Victor looks at the board, and he looks at people. Victor's remarks include these one-liners: "Since you're human, I guess you think that is a pretty good move." "Your word scored less than a CMU student at a party." For all his clever remarks, Victor is a poor player, incapable of strategizing to two or three moves ahead, and its poor show of Scrabble skills is by design.

While Watson can outdo its brainy human competition with no risk of hurting their resolve to try again at games of mental skill, some Scrabble players might lose interest if Victor were to always get away with the highest scores. Simmons wanted to make sure Victor's powers were not great enough to intimidate casual players. Yet another human-like quality given to Victor is that it is a sore loser. Victor is happy when it is ahead but launches into trash talk when losing. The robot's range of emotional responses was helped by Michael Chemers, a former CMU drama professor who shaped the [robot's](#) personality.

Interestingly, some years back, Chemers wrote in his blog about social robotics." I am convinced now that performance theory is going to be of

greater importance as the field develops... Social intelligence is the reason why human cognition is so much more advanced over the other primates, and it is heavily imbricated with performance and mimesis. [Machine](#) intelligence will have to develop similarly; I'm proud and excited to be involved with this."

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