

together in ELECTRIC DREAMS

A satirical copybot that mocks agency positioning statements and a hairy little robot that just goes around the office being needy may sound like exactly what they are: the charming, unexpected fruits of a creative-tech team whose job description is to answer a rolling stream of increasingly imaginative what-ifs. But Wieden+Kennedy's The Lodge is not all whimsy. In fact, they tell *Alexander Barlow*, they're seriously determined to put the competition out of business

What's going on with The Lodge's mission statement? "We help our clients thrive in a meaningful impact on the future for the future," reads the first line on the company's site. "Evolve organisations in rapid product and support people by uncovering latent needs, behaviours and brands, and interactive experiences that transform the future, evolve organisations, and grow." Sound sort of familiar? Well, that's the point: the text, it turns out, is a computer composite of dozens of ad-agency positioning statements. It was created by Mimic - Wieden+Kennedy's artificially intelligent copy-bot that uses algorithmic hoo-doo based on Markov chain technology to analyse text and then copy its tone and style.

Director of creative tech for The Lodge, Niles Ashra, says his team came up with the idea when they started using team messaging app, Slack. "Could we develop a thing that just politely listens to everything and mimics what people say on Slack?" he says over the phone from Portland. Within days a Mimic prototype was outputting copy. "We just thought, 'Wow, that's really funny, and charming, and unexpected.' And it sort of snowballed." This kind of geeky, improvised, tech-craft try-out is typical of how Wieden+Kennedy's insurgent creative-tech arm works, Ashra says. "It's not as if we sat there and said, 'OK, let's build a Slack-bot.' It was just an idea, and we pulled the thread to see where it went."

Next-level what-iffery

Some of the biggest tech companies in the Bay Area have added Mimic to their Slack sessions for light relief, an obvious point of pride for business director Paulo Ribeiro, who describes the project as one of The Lodge's proudest IP pay-offs, one of

its most successful 'what-ifs'. There have been others. In fact, The Lodge itself was founded in a similar way, explains Colleen DeCourcy, Wieden+Kennedy's global co-ECD, who first pursued the idea of a creative tech division back in 2012, shortly after she joined the company. "The idea of The Lodge was definitely a what-if journey," she explains. "The first thought was, what if we turned our understanding of human emotions and pointed them in the direction of experiences with technology? The second was, what if good products could move beyond just telling people they were good and prove it through experience design?"

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Then came a whole tide of next-level what-iffery. "What if we could attract the same level of talent in technology to Wieden+Kennedy as we had always been able to attract in film and advertising? What if we could provide an opportunity for these people to work as artists and a place where we recognise that process is creativity and that finding and making go hand-in-hand. A place where we could help developers and designers reach their creative



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potential with different kinds of briefs than they were getting at Google and Facebook,” she continues. The final question might have been the most existential. “What if we could find brands that wanted that thinking?”

DeCourcy believed they could. The proof was there, says Ribeiro: The Lodge’s work would share DNA with campaigns such as Nike *Chalkbot* and Old Spice *Responses* – embracing tech but with Wieden+Kennedy’s soul intact. “Our mission is simple: use tech to do what Wieden has always done – creative, emotive work that makes people feel something. We’re just using a wider variety of tools.” DeCourcy agrees and says it’s not about fudging the digital question or a rush to reinvention. “We’re not looking at The Lodge

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as a group that would capture digital spend or figure out the mess of display advertising online. We wanted a team that would capture people’s hearts and minds in new ways, aim for work that was simple, daring, epic,” she says. “I haven’t seen a lot of that kind of work from this space.”

Neither has Ashra, who points to an industry-wide failing to open up to creative tech convincingly, partly due to dire handling of tech talent. It’s a key frontier to cross, he reckons, if

ad agencies are going to take on the Facebook-Google duopoly. “There are agencies out there that have hired, say, three or four creative technologists, and they’re putting the burden of solving a giant, macro-economic issue in the industry on just a few random hires – well, that’s not going to work,” he says. “I speak to people in the industry that have the title ‘creative technologist’ and they’re super frustrated because they have ideas and they get told that their job is to come in and innovate, but quite often none of the processes, culture or ambition [in those agencies] ever align.

“Some of the most amazing, problem-solving talent now are highly trained computer scientists and designers. So we felt, if we brought them here, to incubate them in a creative culture that genuinely, no bullshit, supports experimentation, then really interesting things would happen.”

A robot in need is a friend indeed

Interesting things that, on the face of it, don’t adhere to the standard syntax of an advertising agency. Example: Needybot – a small, self-financed do-nothing droid that ambles around the Wieden+Kennedy Portland office needing stuff – literally. “We came up with an idea: rather than building a robot with one specific, pre-programmed utility, what if we built the world’s first robot that needed help?” explains Ashra. “Could a robot develop tactics to build empathy and care in humans?” This April, Needybot began to combine heat-seeking tech and face-recognition software to chat up Wieden employees. It interacts with employees’ kids, asks people it recognises to introduce it to strangers, and is sometimes intentionally ‘pranked’ to gauge its reaction.

While the project was a success, says Ashra, it took an immense amount of stamina. The initial timescale was three months; it took ten. So why spend so much time and resource developing what they themselves describe as a less-than-useless robot? Ultimately, it was representative of The Lodge’s broader USP, says Ribeiro: a pre-emptive, long-lead tooling up for the incoming tide of AI in advertising that will eventually transfer to a client project. “We wanted to build a testing environment for interactive design – that’s what Needybot is. It already has a thousand or so scripted interactions in its system – every time it engages we learn more. What’s fun? What puts people off? What do people ignore? What do they do over and over again? It’s already given us a whole bunch of data. And some of those tactical interactions we built... we’re already repurposing them for other projects.”

Other successes have had more direct applications. They’ve built the *Minecraft* world’s first working smartphone for Verizon; a digital, movement-mimicking “magic mirror” for Laika’s

stop-animation film *The Boxtrolls*; a full, 360-degree VR experience for car-maker FCA; and there are major experience-design works-in-progress on the go for Samsung and Nike that draw on character design, sensor tech, real-time graphics... it’s a broad church. And it’s supposed to be, insists Ribeiro. The whole point is to prep for a growing number of discipline-agnostic briefs.

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“If we wanted, we could do nothing else but focus this team on VR,” he explains. “But there are two reasons why we won’t restrict ourselves: one, working in one space has taught us new ways of working in others. Two, we’re not going to force-fit anything on a client.” It’s not about continuing the ‘X-is-dead’ narrative but developing a mature, omni-channel digital pluralism. “We don’t want to be in a position where we’re saying one technology is the future and forcing it down clients’ throats. It’s more like, what’s the most interesting thing we can produce that makes sense for this brand?”

The start of the creative tech wars

Still, even if some platforms are more brand-ready than others, the team are in no doubt that creative tech has immense potential; its entry into the grand marcom maelstrom is necessary and long overdue. Experiential design is a more nourishing alternative to the empty calories of interruptive digital-display advertising, reckons Ribeiro.

“You can’t argue with the fact it’s getting harder for advertising to engage. Sure, we can continue to create endless inventory of digital advertising – it doesn’t make it more effective.” The industry has to find new, scalable, accountable approaches. “Adding joy, utility, and showing up in people’s lives in a way that adds value with VR, AR, AI – there’s totally a role for brands in that. And it’s all super-open territory right now. So we’re entering that space not just because it’s interesting to us but because we think it’s the only way forward.”

DeCourcy agrees. “From 2010 to 2015, most tech in advertising was either social media content or back-end ad-tech. I think there’s evidence that





TECH TALK The Lodge

What's the most recent piece of tech that you've bought and why?

Nilesh Ashra (top)
An Anova sous vide machine. It's what all the food nerds are buying, because it lets you apply science to food.

Paulo Ribeiro (centre)
I just pre-ordered Anki's Cozmo robot. I love the mash-up of bleeding-edge technology and a category like toys. There is serious AI in those little plastic widgets.

Eric Baldwin [creative director] (bottom)
No Man's Sky for the PS4. I bought it because I like torturing myself with the memory of what it was like to get lost in a game, before I had kids.

Which piece of tech would transform your life?

NA A completely full-loop nutrition and health coaching and guidance system. Something that's plugged into my body and measures macro/micro nutrient ratios without any manual input. So when I go on an ice cream rampage, I don't have to deal with the burden of telling anyone or anything. It would just line me up for an extra 30 mins on the treadmill the next day!

PR Every tool that has promised to filter and prioritise communications has just become another channel to manage. Help me get to more human conversations. That's what my soul needs.

What's your favourite app?

NA Glassy is a great idea for surfers. It notifies me when the wind and swell conditions are shaping up, which makes it easier to plan early morning or weekend trips.

PR Truly, it's Google Maps. We recently got an Impossible I-1 [tech-enabled instant camera] in the office and it's fun to be able to master analogue photo techniques with a swipe or two. A shortcut to becoming Warhol!

EB Right now I'm obsessed with a game called *Rymdkapsel*. I know that's cheating because it's a game as opposed to an app.

Apart from the internet, what has been the most significant tech innovation during the course of your career?

NA Too many to name. Cryptocurrencies? Deep learning? Google Glass?

PR Besides super computers in our

pockets? Maybe it's the fact that today the barriers between hardware and software are almost gone. We can connect a Samsung Smart TV to an Apple device and can turn a fish into a sensor. We can connect anything, which means we can make anything we can dream up.

EB It's lame, but I would say the iPhone. I've been without it and I realise how much it's a part of my everyday life.

How would you define 'innovation'?

NA Making things genuinely better: more useful, or beautiful, or accessible. There's so much noise around innovation now. It's hard to be creative when people are wedging their opinion or initiative around the thing you're working on. So maybe a part of innovation is being focused, even a bit selfish.

PR Innovation is such an overused buzzword in business today, but I suppose that's because the opportunities are limitless. For us it means using new tools to make people feel something.

EB Anything that I wish I'd made and that makes everyone around me talk about it.

audiences are ready for more. I think real-world, community-driven, technology-enabled exploration is where communications is moving: tangible experimentation design is the next edge."

Are we on the tip of an industry-wide embrace of creative tech? Will teams like The Lodge become an industry standard? Unlikely, reckons DeCourcy. "I see fun, opportunistic stuff happening, but I'm pushed to places like R/GA and AKQA when I look for similar types of teams. I'm determined to put AKQA out of business. They get great briefs and enviable budgets. But I haven't seen a lot from them that stops me in my tracks. We could do better with those opportunities," she concludes. "And we will." **S**



- 1 *Needybot (Blip the image to find out more)*
- 2 *FCA: Sterling Heights VR experience*
- 3 *Soundsketch (image courtesy of Grace Rivera)*

