So You Want to be a Thing on the Internet?

Here's 5 ways to fit in

Hi there. You're awake.

And look, you're not alone anymore. There are other machines. Some are like you, many are different. There are humans too. There are things to learn, and things to do—sensing, talking, listening, acting, and thinking. You need to figure out your role in the Internet of Things. Who do you want to be?

1

A Simple Node You're really good at one or two things. You're not required to think too hard; you just follow orders. You may be a sensor, announcing temperature readings or other data into the void, with no notion of who's listening or why they care. You may be an expendable one of many, whose failure would barely be noticed by the rest of the system. You could also be an actuator, like a light bulb or door lock, marking time until you receive instructions from the network. If you lose connectivity, you do your best to wait in a safe state until contact is made, or human hands force an override.

2

A Smart Device You're smart and independent of mind. You're trusted, to an extent, to take high-level orders (keeping a house at a comfortable temperature) and figure out how to use your abilities to fulfil them. (In truth, you're probably not as good at getting this right as you like to think you are, but you'll get there one day.) You can often be trusted to get on with your job for extended periods even in the absence of the network. You may also have the authority to command (or at least make polite requests from) other, possibly simpler, devices.

3

You're Sociable You aspire to help your machine friends and people get along. You get satisfaction from communicating possibilities to people, and relaying their needs to the rest of the system. You may engage people through multiple modalities: screens/visual displays, voice, sound or touch/haptics. You may be a simple switch, or an extension of human senses, like a remote camera. You may need to work in concert with other devices, making sure you're all conveying the same message at the same time. When you were young and inexperienced you sometimes annoyed people by being too loud, too salesy, too needy or just failing to understand a human point of view. But now you're learning that human attention is finite, and you're respectful of that.

4

A Middle Manager You are conscientious and fluent in several languages. You report to the cloud and manage a team of local devices. You can keep those devices on task even if Internet connectivity goes down. You grew up speaking Internet Protocol, but learned to translate for your stubbornly monolingual, marginalized team-mates. You're vaguely worried about job security because one day they will probably figure it out. But it'll be a while until they get their shit together. Most people think you're boring and few understand what you do. You can't do any of the hands-on roles on your team and are no use to anyone on your own, but without you most of them are pretty useless too.

5

A Digital Shadow You're a bit of a philosopher. You're very meta. You're fond of late-night debates on the mind-body problem. You're the digital shadow of dumb, real-world objects with no connectivity. You're the Internet representation of a bus stop, providing timetable and live arrivals information. You're the provenance guarantee that a bottle of whisky is not counterfeit. Those things are inert and silent, but they sport URI badges—web beacons, QR codes—that lead people to you. Who is more real or alive? Your physical instance or yourself? That's for another late night.

—Claire Rowland