

WWJDB: What Would James Bond Do?

Shards of his phone's screen glass were scattered all around him on the ground. His thoughts were just as scattered. His gut is on fire, his head feels like it's been caved in, and he's cold, so cold. He pushed himself up with his left hand, and saw the tattoo on his wrist: WWJBD. He had to think: what *would* James Bond do? James Bond would get his mind together. But his mind wasn't functioning right. Everything was blurry.

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The Program was never meant for him. It was probably meant for other programs, other systems that would undoubtedly earn marketers more money hunting slack-jawed consumers in a sea of data.

That wasn't why he built The Program, though. It was the culmination of his PhD dissertation that had become the most advanced artificial intelligence system in the field. He wanted to become the most recognized leader in computer science. The world would lie at his feet. He would have the most viewed TED talk on the Internet. He would become a recurring guest on RadioLab, the computer scientist version of Oliver Sachs.

Not yet, though—he'd held off publishing to test it. Like many scientists, he tested his invention on himself.

He had two major breakthroughs in his work. The first came almost exactly a year ago. For fifty years, machine learning algorithms had been using artificial neural networks based on grossly simplified versions of brain operations had stalled the field at clunky programs limited to specific actions dictated by the programmers.

Late one night, as he studied the neuroscience of the brain in the silence of his dark apartment, he lapsed into a daydream as he stared into an abstract painting on the wall he once purchased at a garage sale. Maybe it was the third whiskey on his brain but he watched the colors and thought: are they hovering? The light colors against the dark lines that bordered the shapes seemed to lift the shapes off the canvas, the edges waving slightly while others faded back. *Is that 3-D?*

He remembered that he once read in a neuroscience textbook that the rods in the eyes recognize shape and movement by being sensitive to the contrast between light and dark. He got up and felt the painting with his fingers, drifting the tips over the brushstrokes. He sank back into the couch and stared at the painting, and that's when he arrived at a simple, yet hard to accept, principle: the brain is not a thinking machine, but a pattern-recognizing one.

The brain usually only reacted, basing actions on remembered history. The brain recognized patterns by building on prior pattern recognitions hierarchically, from simple to complex. People experienced, learned lessons in life, recognized a few patterns, and responded when situations matched situations they'd already experienced. *People only react to patterns*, he realized as watched the shapes hover within the painting. And patterns could be predicted.

For a week he spent twenty hours a day developing a matrix of every element that behavioral scientists had established impacted people's decisions. On one axis he listed personality criteria of the subject: likely personality traits, parents' marital status, their financial history, their education level, even whether they had eaten in the last four hours. On the other axis typed out a list of situational criteria: whether the decision faced the subject with an attractive person, a person of authority, a near-term deadline, a threat or an opportunity, or whether the situation had been experienced before. He then used algorithms drawing from Bayesian Inference to extract the most probable decision from all available information.

It was the most comprehensive matrix that anyone had ever built into an artificial intelligence program, and for good reason: no computer scientist had ever truly attempted to build a program to match the complexity of human psychology. Science fiction authors conveniently skipped the *how* to jump to the *when* robots could pass for humans. And somehow the robots always became evil, human-killing machines. But the applications of such a model were endless. Every telemarketing firm in the world would race to buy the program.

To test it, he built it off the one test subject he knew the most thoroughly: himself. He used his own profile for the "personality" of the Program. He programmed it using the features of his own personality, his own life history, and his own typical emotional reactions.

And it worked. When he ran test situations against his Program, the Program made determinations that correlated with his own, independent decisions 87% of the time, with p-values $< .0013$.

Ebullient, he began preparing a study using a pool of subjects recruited through social media networks, bringing in a team of other grad students who normally studied trends in Facebook. After comparing the Program's answers to a questionnaire with those a selection of

subjects provided on their own, independently completed questionnaires, he learned just how accurate his Program could be. He could wave those results throughout the academic world, bringing him fame, fortune, a tenured professorship and a number of book deals.

Then he read the paper of some MIT students (and did it always have to be MIT?) advertising the work he'd spent five years developing. Not that they'd stolen his work; no, they'd just developed the almost the same artificial intelligence program as his. But they'd gotten there first. In the tech world, no one cared about the guy who finished second.

For a week he lay on his couch, slurping cereal from a bowl, watching TV. Calls from his dissertation advisor went unreturned. If he had a girlfriend, she would have dumped him. But he hadn't had a girlfriend in years, so he didn't have to add that blow to the mix.

It was the James Bond movie marathon that led to the second breakthrough.

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He'd watched many Bond movies over the years, going to the new ones alone when no one joined him. Part of the allure of James Bond was that he was on the opposite end of the spectrum from David. James Bond was smart, but also always cool, calm, and collected. David was awkward, shy, and nervous. Bond always knew how to react. David stuttered when he didn't know how to answer a question. Bond leaped even when it wasn't clear he would land safely. David had to look both ways three times before crossing the street. And who couldn't admire a man who knew exactly how to approach a woman and make her fall for him?

Dr. No, the original Bond film, was on. Sean Connery was suave and handsome, awake to everything, and exuded the confidence that everything he did was exactly as it should have been done. David watched Connery's Bond move about the screen, raising only an amused eyebrow in the face of danger. *If only I could act like Bond*, David thought.

That's it! He could use Bond as the basis for his Program. The Program would tell him, with near exactitude, how he could act like Bond.

Bond was a fictional character, of course. David certainly knew that; no one acted like Bond in all situations. No one was as calm and determined in every situation as Bond. People were emotional, they panicked, they ran for their lives. They missed the shot under pressure, they succumbed to injury, they said the wrong things when the stakes were high. No one could be like Bond all the time.

Except the Program could.

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David studied the minutia of life from the computer scientists' perspective, breaking each daily decision into a series of smaller decisions that people take for granted everyday. Lest one believe that this approach is overwrought with tiny details, . . . Well, that's where people forget just how much the brain automates life functions.

James Bond's life included all those everyday situations, and set him up for a life ready for any challenge would-be world domineers might create. His life began with the way he approached the world--always in style, dressed to impress in any environment, and ready to enjoy the finer moments that came with them. James Bond didn't stroll to the store in sweat pants and a t-shirt; he walked into a restaurant with a fitted dress shirt and polished shoes, ordering a Perrier with his vodka. The first thing he learned from Ian Fleming's character: in Bond's world, there was no place for a slob.

Studying Bond left him with the nagging sense that he'd treated himself, and his life, like he were rushing through it like he was perpetually tackling an endless number of grimy weekend household chores. He hadn't bought new clothes in years; all his clothes were spotted with the

stains of fast food eaten at his desk. He managed his wiry hair with scissor trims between monthly haircuts. He had worn the same scudded, wrinkled shoes for a year. The 30-minutes of recommended daily exercise barely covered the amount of walking he did in a week.

He didn't spring for the finest brand-name labels, but damn it felt good to don a wardrobe of brand new, well-fitted clothes. He learned to use the weight machines at the university gym. And he hadn't before realized how relaxing it could be to sit with his coffee in the cafe before he rushed off to work.

He was ready to tackle the next challenge of being Bond, or just being a man: dating. He modified the Program's algorithms to process dating scenarios, the likely questions, moves, and responses he would need to make for a successful date. David had always struggled with the highly uncertain nature of dating; the Program provided him with a roadmap. It gamed out all the likely scenarios based on the mood and temperament of the women he approached.

He scraped data from his Facebook network; research had shown the most likely mates to be within his social circle, or one step removed. The matching algorithm paired him with three women (there wasn't exactly a large pool of women to start with). All likes being equal, he selected the one with the most attractive evolutionary features: high cheekbones, full lips, and large breasts.

"David, I'm so glad you asked me out for dinner," Rachel said when the waiter seated them. "Though I admit I was surprised when you messaged me. It's been some time since we saw each other at Greg's birthday happy hour."

The Program defined the best restaurant as one with moderately high cost to include dim lighting, tables not too clustered, with a classic decor. He spent an hour searching through Yelp, he located a restaurant with three dollar signs, a brick interior with only ten tables. Someday, he

would build into the Program an interface with Yelp.

A tiny microphone in his ear, connected to his smartphone with Bluetooth, processed her responses through his phone's speech recognition software and fed him the responses programmed for the highest probability of wit and humor. He had fed the Program recordings of all the conversations between James Bond and any one of the various "Bond girls." Since he and Rachel both worked in analytics at one point, he ad-libbed some of the responses to tailor them to familiar subjects.

Towards the end of the meal, David caught a look from Rachel that he recognized from many James Bond movies: the moment a Bond girl betrays her attraction to him. It caught him by surprise. He almost wasn't sure how to proceed. Thankfully, the Program guided him through the end of the date smoothly.

As he walked her to her apartment building front door, in his ear the Program informed him of a probability of 86% that when she asked if he wanted to come up for a drink she intended to sleep with him.

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The Program had been an almost unbridled success. David had continued to tweak the code, adjusting the algorithm based on lessons learned from real situations. Dates with Susie and Karen had also seen the same level of success as his initial date with Rachel. Still, he found more and more situations in which to apply the aid of the Program. He smoothly guided the conversation with his advisor over state of his as yet un-finished research project to a renewal of the funding grant financing it. He convinced his landlord not to raise his rent with the next year's lease. Even his local cafe's barista gave him a wink with his coffee.

One day he was walking by a tattoo shop, and he thought, *Why not me?* He came out with

a tattoo of *WWJBD* on his wrist in the serif font used for the *Goldeneye* film poster. *What Would James Bond Do.*

It was during his revisions to version 3.2 of the Program that he met Irina. He had spotted Irina crossing the street one day, and then had spotted her again sitting at a table at a cafe near the university.

One day he waited for her to exit the café, and bumped into her so that her coffee dropped to the ground with a splat.

“I’m so sorry,” he said. “That was absolutely my fault.”

He saw her frown and furrow her brow as she examined the coffee splattered across the sidewalk. Maybe he’d gone too far and angered her—the plan’s overall success probability had barely been greater than chance, at 56%. But the Program had also predicted with a 72% rating that the meeting of her eyes with his own as he smiled and handed her a handkerchief would dampen rising displeasure. He offered to buy her more coffee, and when she hesitated he upped the offer to a seasonal flavored latte. He stayed calm, and stayed confident. Irina relented and took him up on the offer.

David took the opportunity to get to know her while they waited in line, listening attentively as she talked about her life. She had a faint Ukrainian accent even after twenty years in the United States. Her cousins in Ukraine updated her constantly about the war in the east part of the country. She ached to visit home but had not been able to yet. Once they had their coffee she even stood with him for several minutes, continuing to tell him about Ukrainian culture compared with American assumptions.

When he caught her glancing at her watch, he ended the conversation. He suggested that they meet for coffee again, but perhaps without spilling some first. She hesitated, but when he

applied just the right degree of lift to either corner of his mouth as he smiled she softened and agreed. He entered her number into his phone.

Later he convinced her to go with him to a Greek restaurant for dinner instead, since she had mentioned her love of Mediterranean food. Over souvlaki, kefta kabob, and baklava she told him about life as a child in Mariupal and Kiev. She began to complain about the uselessness of most Ukrainian men, “even the ones who came to America haven’t learned to be good to their women.” She reflexively reached across her chest with her right hand to rub her left shoulder, as though nursing an old wound.

“Unlike Ukrainian, many American men let me talk, like you. Though many stare at me as though I am a doll, afraid to touch.”

“But you’re not like a diamond either.”

Irina cocked her head and scrunched her brow. David smiled and leaned slightly forward in his chair. “Well, . . . hardest substance found in nature, they cut glass, suggest marriage, I suppose it replaced the dog as a girl's best friend.” That was one of David’s favorite Bond lines, from *Diamonds are Forever*. In the movie, M responds to Bond *Refreshing to hear there’s one subject you’re not an expert on.*

Irina laughed, “Yes, you could say that. Did anyone ever say that you are very witty?”

“Only my friends with a sense of humor.”

After dinner, she insisted on taking him for gelato. “You must have ice cream on cold nights.”

They stood smiling at each other as they scooped the gelato from cups. Until her phone rang; she frowned at the screen. She answered in Ukrainian. After a terse statement she hung up.

“A close friend?” he asked.

“He is no one.” She didn’t elaborate.

The Program was silent, so David took that as a sign to let the silence sit.

A compliment will induce warm feelings toward you with 67% probability, the Program informed him a moment later through the bud in his ear. David looked down at his ice cream, then looked back at Irina. “Thanks for taking me for ice cream,” he said.

Irina laughed. “You are the one who has paid for it.” She scooped another spoonful into her mouth. “So thanks to you.”

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He would later wonder, while sorting through his scattered thoughts as he lay shivering on the pavement clutching the knife wound in his gut, whether his feelings for Irina led him to act more like James Bond than the Program. The recurring crack in Bond’s cool was his compulsive need to save, or at least attempt to save, the women he seduced.

For weeks, things had been fine and getting better. He took Irina to see artsy movies, hipster bars, sleek galleries, and haute restaurants. But the calls became incessant—before long, every nice evening was broken by another angry voicemail from the man who could not let go. A glance at the number and her face would go dark. The transcribed text of the voicemail would make her go silent. David noticed her look over her shoulder once when she was walking with him down the street. The Program warned of a 90% probability that Irina would withdraw from all people after several weeks.

He stayed up late each night, feeding the Program personality data on mongoloid thugs—though the dataset he used was named something far more scientific: “Interviews with business enforcers.” He needed the Program to determine the balance between aggression and influence. Too much aggression only instigated an equivalent or higher level of aggression in return. The

trick was to instigate a situation in which aggression was neutralized, allowing him to assert enough influence to bring Irina with him.

“I see the way your face changes when his number comes up,” David told her. “If you need help . . .”

“It is not your problem, David.”

“I want to make sure you’re safe. Someone might need to intervene.”

Irina smiled but didn’t react. Now that that he thought of it, she hadn’t understood that he already had an intervention in mind.

The night he convinced Vlad to meet him, Vlad expected Irina. And of course his name had turned out to be something as darkly Slavic as Vlad. David had configured his phone to appear as a replica of Irina’s, displaying her number on Vlad’s phone. David had initially tried a soft power approach of having “Irina” spurn him via text, but Vlad only became more possessive. So the plan transitioned to an act of aggression countered with a show of domination to create a division between the two of them.

If only other people could be scripted so neatly by the Program. The Program could only provide probabilities of reactions, not exact responses.

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For a while the scene went as envisioned:

Irina arrived at the park bench to find Vlad there. Vlad grew angry because she was not as happy to see him as he’d expected from “her” texts. Vlad raised his voice and Irina became upset. That’s when David stepped in from the shadows to tell Vlad to leave her alone.

Except Irina turned on David, not Vlad, accusing him of stalking her after Vlad repeated a text “she” had sent that she never remembered sending. “My life is not a doll’s for you to

play,” she shouted at David as she stormed off.

The glint of blade that caught David’s eye made him react as he should have, by pushing Vlad’s arm upward and across his body, but David had not practiced enough jujitsu to prevent that knife from coming back toward his torso from the other side.

On the ground, his shirt growing wet with warm blood, he lay staring at the asphalt. His eye drifted to the white lines of a crosswalk nearby. In the same chapter was the picture of the Ponzo Illusion: a picture of two yellow bars top of black lines forming receding railroad tracks. The trick was that despite the fact that both yellow lines were exactly the same size, the top bar appeared shorter on top of the receded tracks. Hold up a ruler and establish that both lines were the same; it wouldn’t matter. They looked different no matter how many times you blinked.

“Isn’t that just like people?” David muttered, placing a hand over the burning wound in his abdomen. He should probably call someone, but he hadn’t gotten to that yet. He thought about how Irina returned to her dominator, how David hadn’t known to account for the turn in Irina’s allegiances.

The Program informed him it needed more information for a probability calculation. “Because people don’t see the way things are.” The Program didn’t respond, so he went on. “They see only what their brain tells them to see. And there’s no way around it.”

He would be physically okay, the Program assured him, as long as he applied steady pressure to the wound and sought medical attention immediately. David muttered a command to call 911. He pressed his hand to his wound, and spotted the *WWJBD* tattoo. He decided it would be nice to have bedrest. That would give him the time to examine every niche of his decision behavior model used by the Program to account for the blindnesses of the mind. James Bond may not have been the most reflective sort, but even he learned from his mistakes.