Back Page: Dr. Roboto

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Melissa Smith is a senior user experience (UX) researcher at Stadia, Google's gaming platform, where she works to improve how players engage with interactive entertainment systems. Smith also volunteers with FIRST Robotics, a nonprofit helping to get K-12 kids interested in STEM through annual robotics competitions.

You became interested in robotics as a kid. What appealed to you about human-robot interactions?

As a kid and continuing on throughout my life, I've been fascinated with the concept of optimizing systems and making them more efficient. Human-robot and human-computer interaction appealed to me because it seemed like the ultimate form of optimization, since there are tasks that humans are innately better at doing and other tasks that computers and robots are better at doing.

How did your study of psychology lead you to zero in on human trust in automation?

The psychology of trust, especially human-human trust, is vast and complex. Being able to learn about how humans develop and display trust in something with variables that can be controlled (like a computer agent or a robot partner) was a fun way to contribute to the field of trust research.

Can you provide an example of how your work at Google has influenced the end-user experience? Or a sneak peek of an experience we can look forward to?

Working at a company like Google on projects like YouTube and Stadia is fun because the reach of your projects can be billions of people, which is exhilarating and humbling at the same time. A favorite project from YouTube is double-tap-to-seek, which allows you to skip forward or backward in a YouTube video on your phone by double tapping on the right or left side of the screen; this feature is now used more than the scrub bar (the progress bar at the bottom of a video) and is so intuitive. A favorite project from Stadia has been working to improve the transfer of an in-progress game from one device (like a TV console) to another device (like a phone or computer). This is one of the ways in which Stadia is helping to create the future of video gaming and interactive entertainment.

Recent research has spotlighted a gender gap in STEM and has revealed gender biases in gaming. What remedies do you believe could help counteract these biases?

Finding one's community can really help at the individual level, whether it's a work-related group or just people you connect with who can offer perspective and an outlet. For me, connecting with researchers across the industry at conferences, getting involved with Black UX Network events, and staying active through my volunteering with FIRST Robotics all provided me outlets and perspectives that help balance the day-to-day.

What's your advice for students or other early-career psychologists interested in careers in UX or product development?

For students: Apply for and do as many internships (only paid ones!) as you can. Many major companies have internships available for students, whether undergrad or graduate. These provide a great way to learn what aspects of a job or company you like—and more importantly, what you don't like. My internships with the Navy, a couple of Naval consultant companies, and Google all taught me different skills I continue to use and apply today.

For early-career folks: Make an effort to take note of new research trends through attending conferences, reading publications, or even perusing lighter reads like UX-relevant Medium articles. These efforts can pay off by keeping you agile and up to date on developing UX techniques and trends.

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