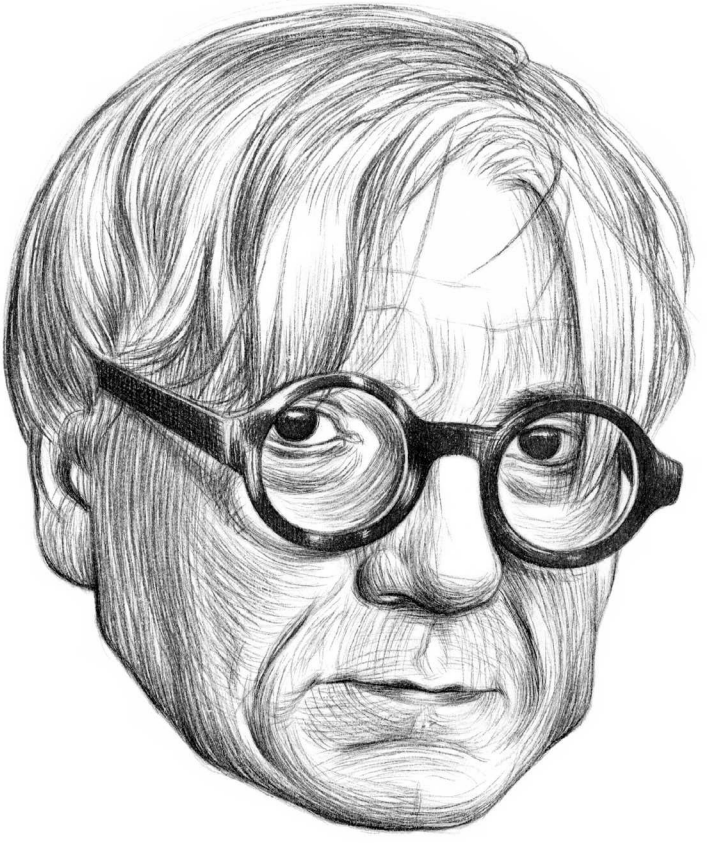
A digital voice synthesis studio, Edinburgh, Scotland, October 2013. The studio is small and untidy, not intended to accommodate clients as other spaces in this building are. On a table in the corner of the room a robotic model of a human head is supported on a stack of books. From the front this robot presents a convincing appearance of a man in his early 50s. The head is made of a synthetic skin mask detailed with real yellowish-grey human hair in a side parting. The lips and eyes are skillfully hand-painted soft rubber. The skin mask is bonded to an aluminium frame with firm moulded rubber features. The robot is wearing elegant dark brown and caramel coloured horn-framed glasses.

Behind the robot is a computer, and various electronic components. Three circuit boards are connected to an antique valve amplifier mounted on a heavy mahogany base inside the robot's head. The interface between these elements is curious — a union of the technical aesthetics of two eras. In contrast to its face, the robot's workings appear improvised. The circuit boards hang from crudely soldered wires and tape has been used liberally to secure connections that have needed repair or repositioning. An engineer is adjusting a faulty connection between the computer and a motor in the back of the robot's head that should produce a synchronised motion in its jaw. He is unfamiliar with the robot, but has apparently determined that the problem is not the digital signal, the jaw itself is jammed in a mechanical rigor mortis.



While the engineer loosens various screws around the frame to release the tension in the jaw, a second man enters the room: an academic, whose university research department has indirectly commissioned this robot. The two have not met before. Seeing the engineer struggle to adjust the frame without it collapsing, the academic, superficially more familiar with its construction, apologetically intervenes. The engineer is grateful and returns to the computer, politely asking about the motivations of the project.

"The robot is designed to resemble the Scottish author Gilbert Adair," the academic responds. "Adair died two years ago. The likeness is based on a photograph printed on the dust jacket of the hardback edition of his novel "The Death of the Author" from 1992. I am studying Adair for my Ph. D. My topic is a sub-culture of amateur writers known as 'continuators'. It's fan-fiction — writing that is motivated by a desire to continue the stories of others, or to bring more detail to existing literary universes. Continuators are very often science fiction enthusiasts. There is a vast amount of fan-fiction set in the Star Trek universe …"

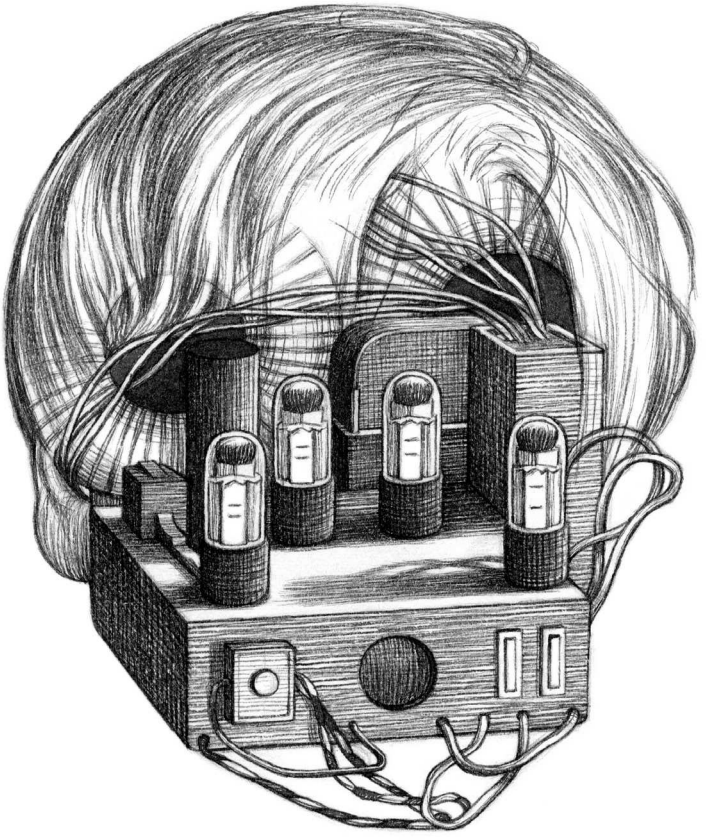
"So, Gilbert Adair wrote science fiction?" asks the engineer.

"Oh, no, Adair didn't write any sci-fi himself. He was a serious novelist and critic. But everything he wrote was somehow about continuing the journeys of other writers."

"He wrote a sequel to Lewis Carroll's 'Alice', he translated Georges Perec's "La Disparition" — a novel without a letter 'e' — and he wrote an English version of Roland Barthes's "Mythologies". All remarkable technical accomplishments. I think he was trying to understand the post-modern moment that he was working in. Looking for a way of relating to the work of those who came before him." He pauses, supposing that he may be losing the engineer's attention. "But that makes him sound too serious. His work was very funny and mischievous actually."

"So you've made this robot to speak in the voice of Gilbert Adair?" asks the engineer, sounding sceptical. "I'm nearly ready here, have you decided what the first words spoken by Robot Gilbert will be?"

"I've been having difficulty deciding. Should he be programmed to recite his own work or would it be more fitting for him to read another text? I think I'm resolved on a text of his own. It's the opening scene from the novel "A Key to the Tower". Two characters are driving in opposite directions along a remote road in the French countryside. It's night and there is a wild storm. In the moment immediately before they will pass, a flash of lightning brings down a tree that blocks the road in between their two vehicles. The two strangers consider their predicament and one proposes to the other that they should swap cars and each continue their journey in the other's vehicle. The text is on this USB drive."



The engineer connects the drive to the computer. A further technical problem emerges. The software has frozen and the computer needs to be restarted. This process takes several minutes during which time the moving parts in the robot's face slump. "Probably didn't like the formatting of your drive," the engineer offers. After the computer restarts the software reverts to a demonstration routine and becomes unresponsive. The robot unexpectedly begins to speak. It first goes through a sequence of extended vowel sounds, then words of two, three, four syllables, and then rapid chattering. The voice is distorted and its pitch uneven. The engineer feels compelled to explain that a synthesised voice simulation requires hundreds of hours of input to achieve believable, naturalistic results. As only a few hours of inconsistent recordings of Adair's voice have been located, the effect is a strange mixture of the author's slightly camp, warm Scottish accent and a generic computerised voice.

The routine finishes and the robot proceeds to read a text at random from the database to which it is connected. To the surprise and amusement of the two, it reads from the file 'speech_synthesis_recording_notes.doc', an instructional document prepared for clients of the studio. "Recordings should take place in a quiet environment, preferably a recording studio. Speakers should be recorded reading continuous prose. Each text should be read several times, in each of the emotional intonations described in the notes …"