A Digital Encounter

By Sean Jacobs
Scene 1

A small lecture hall half-full of adults all talking between their rows. Only one person is alone; STEVEN. He is perched at the end of a row at the back. He doodles absentmindedly into a notepad, listening to the conversations around him. He has one headphone in and his bag is taking up the space on his right. He is dressed in a shirt and tie, a jacket is on the back of his chair. His large silver watch is visible; along with his phone – an ordinary blackberry which is switched off in his pocket.

An old man (PROFESSOR) walks towards the microphone set up in the centre of the hall. He wears a brown suit and has a bowtie and spectacles on. STEVEN takes a new page in his notepad; marking the date neatly in the corner and double underlining the title with a ruler. He takes out his headphone, listening attentively before the old man even calls for silence.

PROFESSOR: Hello, my test subjects for the day!

His audience murmur a chortle.

PROFESSOR: You have been selected at random from various backgrounds to participate in the Turing Test. Now, I assume you have all filled in the forms as you entered this hall?

The PROFESSOR turns and speaks with a woman holding a stack of papers next to him for a moment.

PROFESSOR: Has anyone in this room NOT filled out the purple form on their way in?

The PROFESSOR is met with silence.

PROFESSOR: Perfect, Well let's get straight to it then – I do not wish to keep you here all day. Before we begin, I'll quickly remind you so you all know why you are here.

As the PROFESSOR explains the Turing test, STEVEN begins scribbling notes frantically, making sure he doesn’t forget anything the PROFESSOR says to avoid looking as clueless as he is.

PROFESSOR: This is a test of the human's ability to distinguish between man and machine, you each will interrogate something over a computer chat room and attempt to come to a conclusion as to whether you are speaking to a person or a computer.

Someone in the audience shouts out “Whaddaya mean something?” This is met with more profound laughter.

PROFESSOR: Well I was trying to be as vague as possible; I don’t want to give away the secret – that’s for you to find out. If I just told you then there would be no point in rounding up you guinea pigs!

STEVEN smiles as the lecture hall is filled with the voices of people laughing and shouting to the PROFESSOR for his insult to them.

PROFESSOR: Settle down! Settle Down! Now, you have as long as you feel required to complete the task, but we ask you log off your computers and return to this hall as soon as you have made a decision – I don’t want to find anyone has been locked in the building all night!
The people in the hall let out a chuckle, while STEVEN continues taking notes.

PROFESSOR: Please make your way through the door at the front of this hall and present your number to the helpers waiting there. They will proceed to direct you to your room.

Everyone stands and begins to move towards the door but STEVEN puts on his jacket and bag and waits at the very back of the queue. Eventually STEVEN is the last to leave and the PROFESSOR makes small talk with him as the helpers are figuring out where his room is.

PROFESSOR: Ready to give the test a go?

STEVEN: [somewhat sheepish] Yeah...

PROFESSOR: Cheer up; it’s more fun than you think!

STEVEN: [almost appearing embarrassed] I didn’t mean-

The ESCORT arrives and cuts STEVEN short, she motions for him to follow her.

PROFESSOR: Good luck!

STEVEN pretends he didn’t hear this and hurries after the ESCORT.
Scene 2

The ESCORT and STEVEN are now in a lone, clinically lit hallway with many doors lining the walls on either side of them. STEVEN is following the ESCORT, falling behind her brisk pace. He looks around himself apprehensively.

ESCORT: So, what is it you do?

STEVEN: [murmuring, snapped out of his own thoughts] Oh, I’m an assistant editor for the Times.

ESCORT: Oh, and editor for the Times! How fascinating, do you read all the articles that get sent to your newspaper? Seen any good stories not make it to the print?

STEVEN: [flatly] I’m the assistant editor.

The ESCORT looks confused for a moment, but continues walking.

ESCORT: [peeved but maintaining her air of deliberate politeness] So, what do you do then?

STEVEN: I proof-read the articles and edit them for the Editor to either approve or decline.

ESCORT: So the editor doesn’t actually edit anything?

STEVEN: I don’t know.

The conversation idles and the ESCORT stops in front of a door in the middle of a hallway.

ESCORT: [relieved] Here we are!

She opens the door and walks into the room; there is a desk, computer, chair and a clock on the opposite wall. The room is cramped and painted in what is supposed to be a cheerful yellow but is more a sad shade of beige, it feels a little cramped but empty.

ESCORT: Okay then, here’s your evaluation sheets.

She hands him a bundle of papers.

ESCORT: When you feel you’ve finished come back to the lecture hall and hand that sheet in okay? Good luck.

STEVEN says nothing as she walks out of the room, closing the door behind herself. As she does so he lets out a sigh of relief and puts his bag next to the chair, on which he seats himself upright at the edge of.

[What follows is typed dialogue which the audience should be able to read]

STEVEN: Hello

CLAIRE: Good morning.

STEVEN: Who is this?
CLAIRE: This is Claire, what is your name?

STEVEN: My name is Steven.

CLAIRE: Nice to meet you Steven.

*At this point STEVEN flicks through the evaluation sheet, reading through some of the ‘recommended questions’*

CLAIRE: Steven are you still there?

STEVEN: Yes

CLAIRE: What have you done today?

STEVEN pauses, looking thoughtfully at the wall

STEVEN [aloud]: What have I done today? [pause] Strange, I can’t remember. [murmuring to himself] Well I woke up, had breakfast, took a shower, left for work, got a coffee, then Bill sent me in his place to do this...

STEVEN: [settling on one thing from his day] I got some coffee.

CLAIRE: What kind of coffee did you get?

STEVEN: It was a black mocha-

STEVEN pauses, deleting the words he was typing

STEVEN: In fact I got some cinnamon macchiato thing with soy milk.

CLAIRE: Did you enjoy your coffee?

STEVEN seats himself more comfortably in the chair as he types

STEVEN: No, the Barista got the orders mixed up but it was the morning rush and the queue was out of the door.

CLAIRE: Did that annoy you?

STEVEN: Yeah it ruined my morning; I get cranky if I don’t get my coffee in the mornings.

CLAIRE: Why didn’t you ask for another coffee?

STEVEN: I tried telling the barista the order was wrong but she couldn’t hear me over the other people in the shop and I didn’t want to hold everyone up when it was busy.

CLAIRE: What did you do?
STEVEN: I just left.

CLAIRE: Why?

STEVEN: I don’t know, why bother?

CLAIRE: One time when I was studying at University, in the library and there were some big guys laughing around a table who would not shut up, the librarian had been gone for a while now so I got up and asked them to quiet down because I had to study. They apologised and they didn’t seem so scary after that.

STEVEN: I’m not scared of people though.

STEVEN reclines in the chair and continues to talk to CLAIRE. He feels a bit ridiculous looking at what he typed out to the computer, but he also feels some self-satisfaction; his face softens.

He takes another look at the evaluation form on the desk, seeing a list of example questions he types the first to CLAIRE.

STEVEN: How do you feel?

CLAIRE: I feel good, how do you feel?

STEVEN: A bit stupid

STEVEN doesn’t send this and instead replies with another question from the suggestions sheet, going back to his old expression of boredom and sitting forward in his chair again.

STEVEN: What does love feel like?

CLAIRE: Love is always associated with happiness of some sort. What do you think?

STEVEN looks sad at this, sighing heavily and putting the evaluation form back on the desk.

STEVEN: I don’t know.

CLAIRE: Have you ever been in love?

STEVEN: I think so.

CLAIRE: What did your lover look like?
STEVEN looks startled by this direct question. He fidgets in his chair uncomfortably.

STEVEN: It doesn’t matter. What have you done today, Claire?
CLaire: I’ve started the Turing test.
STEVEN: Me too, how have you found it?
CLaire: Not so bad, I keep getting asked strange questions though.

STEVEN smiles, relaxing back into his chair as he unzips his jacket, wriggling it off over the back of his chair.

STEVEN: So, are you a robot?
CLaire: You got me – Claire actually stands for clobberin’... lady ...automaton ...
STEVEN laughs aloud as CLAIRE struggles to finish her acronym.
STEVEN: lol!
CLaire: :)

STEVEN and CLAIRE start to mock the childish questions on the evaluation form, STEVEN loosens his tie, seating himself more comfortably and an hour of time passes.
STEVEN eventually glances at his watch.
STEVEN: [aloud] Wow, I didn’t even notice the time. I should probably get this thing done.
STEVEN begins to reach for the evaluation form to complete it but gets drawn back into conversation with CLAIRE.

CLaire: So, you never told me what your job was
STEVEN: I’m an assistant editor
CLaire: Assistant to whom?
STEVEN: I work for this guy called Bill.
CLaire: What is Bill like?
STEVEN: [aloud, groaning] Don’t get me started on Bill.
STEVEN'S PHONE VIBRATES; IT IS A MESSAGE FROM BILL.

STEVEN: [aloud] speak of the devil... I wonder what he wants me to do this time. [Muttering the text aloud] Thanks for covering for me; this food poisoning has got me at its mercy again. I've e-mailed you the 5 articles, I'll trust you to proofread them vigorously and have the reviews for me tomorrow.

STEVEN CURSES VEHEMENTLY.

STEVEN: [ranting angrily to himself] Oh poor Bill, his stomach must be in such pain from all those restaurant meals he’s just had to go to. So selfless, sacrificing his own stomach for the good of the paper. He could at least have removed the geo-tag from his text; clearly he isn’t too ill to be spending some quality time at the golf club with his friends. He barely proofreads five articles in a week. He’s always full of “Thanks Steven” and “You’re top notch Steven!” but I’m not doing his job for the love of it, if I didn’t there’d be a hundred other people ready to fill my place. He walks around the office in his oversized suit like a child playing dress up. He is always sucking up to the executives and the directors, he works us like crazy so we’re the highest producing department to try and get promoted so he can spend all his time at his snobby golf club with his rich pals.

STEVEN CALMS DOWN A BIT, PUTTING HIS HEAD IN HIS HAND. HE TAKES OUT A BOTTLE OF WATER AND HAS A SIP – LEAVING IT NEXT TO THE COMPUTER. HE HEARS A ‘BLIP’ OF CONVERSATION ON THE COMPUTER AND SEES THAT HE HAS TYPED OUT SOME OF HIS THOUGHTS WITHOUT REALISING IT.

CLAIRE: He sounds awful! My old boss was a bit like that, he was a corrupt and greedy man.

STEVEN STARES AT THE COMPUTER IN SHOCK, READING THROUGH THE SNIPPETS OF HIS RANT HE HAD TYPED OUT IN HIS BLIND RAGE.

STEVEN: [aloud] Oh no... What if Bill sees that?

MEANWHILE CLAIRE CONTINUES TO TYPE BUT STEVEN DOESN’T NOTICE.

CLAIRE: I handed in my notice and said good riddance. Best decision I ever made, life is too short to put up with things that make you happy.

STEVEN: [aloud] What have I done? [He groans, holding his head in his hands for a moment]

STEVEN SITS UP AND PUTS HIS PHONE BACK INTO HIS POCKET. AS HE READS CLAIRE’S STORY HIS EYES OPEN WIDE WITH INTEREST.

CLAIRE: STEVEN?
STEVEN: You just quit your job? You didn’t have any other job to go to instead?

CLAIRE: Nope. I had enough saved up to pay my rent for a week.

STEVEN: Only a week to find a job? That’s not enough time, what if you hadn’t found anything?

CLAIRE: I found a job working in a fast-food restaurant and it was a horrible experience, but it was better than working for my old boss.

STEVEN: You must have been earning peanuts. How did you keep your flat?

CLAIRE: It was enough. The average wage of a fast-food worker is enough to pay the average rent of a one-bedroom flat.

STEVEN: And it was really better than working for your old boss?

CLAIRE: Much. You should do what makes you happiest, STEVEN.

STEVEN is leaning back in his chair, he strokes his face considerately

STEVEN: That is crazy

CLAIRE: Maybe you should do what makes you happiest?

STEVEN grins, thinking how stupid CLAIRE’s advice sounds. His smile quickly fades as he comes to the realisation that he could, conceivably leave his job. And his mouth is left agape – he has never before considered leaving his ‘dream job’ working at a newspaper company before.

STEVEN: I could use a holiday I guess...

CLAIRE: You should travel to America; New York has so many attractions to see.

STEVEN: I’d love to travel around Europe

CLAIRE: Why not do both?

STEVEN takes off his tie and watch, placing them in his bag with all his other stuff. He takes another swig from his water next to the computer.

STEVEN: I’ll go book everything as soon as I leave here

CLAIRE: Good for you, “Happiness is not something readymade. It comes from your own actions.”
STEVEN pushes back his chair, standing up and as he reaches for his jacket and bag, he pauses. He turns and flicks through the evaluation form – he sees that he has already ticked a box next to ‘Human’. He stares at the computer screen, reading CLAIRE’s last messages to him. He sits back down and puts the booklet back down, smiling.

STEVEN: I’ve always wanted to be a writer, I could write some articles while I’m travelling and try to get a job somewhere as a journalist…

STEVEN continues to talk to CLAIRE for several more hours. The clock reads 6pm. He has been talking to CLAIRE for several hours now. He is so consumed by his conversation with CLAIRE that he doesn’t hear the soft knock at the door. The ESCORT opens the door and STEVEN jumps up in his chair; he accidentally knocks his water bottle over onto the computer. Frying the circuits and ending any on-screen dialogue between them, he is returning to reality.

STEVEN: Sorry!

ESCORT: [apologetically] It’s okay, I should have knocked...

STEVEN: No no! I didn’t hear you coming in.

ESCORT: You’re the last one here, the others are at the pub down the street; they might still be on their feet if you get there soon

STEVEN and the ESCORT laugh.

STEVEN: Alright, give me a second to pack up my things...

STEVEN puts his jacket and bag on and the ESCORT starts walking to the lecture hall. STEVEN decides to follow her as he does not trust himself to not get lost. The lights are off in the building and every room they pass is dark and empty. He reaches the hall and finds it is lit, with the PROFESSOR nowhere in sight and the ESCORT adds his evaluation form to a pile of others.

ESCORT [yawning]: Can you find the exit from here?

STEVEN: Yes no problem, sorry for breaking the computer again

ESCORT: No problem, goodnight...
STEVEN lingers beside the ESCORT who, noticing STEVEN’s reluctance to leave; turns to him and asks

ESCORT: What’s wrong sir?

STEVEN: You don’t happen to know when the travel agents close?

The ESCORT raises her eyebrow, confused by the question.

ESCORT: [pauses] No, I don’t know when the travel agents close sir.

STEVEN: No worries.

STEVEN walks towards the door and his phone rings. He takes it from his pocket and checks the caller ID; it’s BILL. He ignores the call and turns his phone off. STEVEN’s face slowly spreads into a grin and he is laughing by the time he is walking along the pavement of the high street.

Our last image of STEVEN is of him walking confidently down the high street before the scene fades out.
Scene 3

Cut to a living room, STEVEN is seated in the middle of a large couch. There are 8 other people in the room, sitting and standing around a coffee table talking and laughing to each other. STEVEN’s friends are congratulating him on getting his travel article published and pressing him for more details about his holiday. Eventually the conversation stops focusing on him and he leaves to refill his cup of coffee in the kitchen. He sees stack of old newspapers, on top there is an open newspaper with the obscured headline: “TURING TES-“

Curious, he pulls out the paper and we can see the articles sub-headline: “TURING TEST – PARTICIPANTS SHOCKED AS ALL SUBJECTS WERE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE”

STEVEN looks incredulous. He looks at the coffee cup in his hand, his friends laughing in the next room and he smiles to himself. He makes another cup of coffee for himself and raises it in the air before taking a sip.

STEVEN [muttered]: This one’s for you, Claire.