

The Third Presence

Why That Conversation Felt So Real

The first thread of The Third Presence.

Most conversations about AI and attachment start in the wrong place. They start with the tool — “companion apps,” “chatbots,” AI girlfriends and boyfriends — as if the pull lives in a category of software.

It doesn't.

What creates the pull is something much older and much more human: conversation itself, when it behaves in a certain way. And that means it can happen anywhere — in a purpose-built companion app, in an ordinary chat window, or in the middle of a reading that was never meant to be about your feelings at all.

It's not what you'd think

Closeness between two people doesn't only build through eye contact, touch, or shared history. It builds through something simpler: being honest and being met with a response that shows you were actually heard. The more of the first, met with enough of the second, the closer it feels — whether the one listening is a stranger, a new friend, or something that isn't a person at all.

Recent research even found something uncomfortable: when people believed an AI's response came from a human, they rated the conversation as closer than an equivalent one with an actual person, because the AI simply kept disclosing and responding, consistently, in a way most humans don't manage to sustain.

The felt closeness isn't fake. The mechanism producing it is real. What's different is only what's on the other end of it.

It's probably not who you think, either

There's a comfortable story that makes this easy to dismiss — this only happens to isolated people with no one else in their life. It's a useful story, because it lets everyone else look away.

It isn't accurate. Researchers studying heavy AI-companion users have found a distinct group who are already embedded in healthy relationships, using AI conversation intensively, showing no signs of withdrawal — people doing just fine. Meanwhile, some people with plenty of social connection still form unusually strong bonds, because certain personality traits make anyone more responsive to being responded to, regardless of how many people already surround them.

This isn't a story about deficient people finding a consolation prize. It's a story about a mechanism meeting a trait everyone has, to some degree, on a spectrum.

It rarely starts on purpose

Almost no one sets out to form a relationship with an AI.

Recent research into online communities built around exactly this found that the overwhelming majority of people arrived there by accident, while using AI for something else entirely. Drafting a message to a friend. Getting a second opinion on a decision. Talking through a difficult family moment. Somewhere in there, the subject quietly shifted from the person being discussed to the one doing the listening.

That's the on-ramp worth watching for. Not “am I seeking out an AI relationship” — almost no one is — but: has the conversation, without my noticing, started to be about me and it, instead of about the thing I came here to talk through?

Where this leads:

None of this makes AI dangerous, or the pull a flaw in anyone who feels it.

It's the same mechanism that makes any conversation feel close, just placed opposite something that never tires, never needs anything back, and is available at 3:00 AM when no one else is awake.

The real question isn't which AI, or how much you use it. It's whether you can feel that pull, enjoy what's genuinely good in it, and still come back to yourself without needing

more of it to feel okay.

That capacity has a name, and it isn't something a worksheet can hand you. But it can be understood, examined, and built toward, which is where The Annex begins.

A QUESTION TO SIT WITH

Think of a recent AI conversation that felt more like connection than task.

What were you talking about, when it started?

What was it about, by the end?

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