

Machine Learning Writing Tools as Oracle and Glitch

Carolyn Lau

Department of English, The Chinese University of Hong Kong
carolynlau@cuhk.edu.hk

Abstract

In dialogue with posthuman thought and its theorization of the symbiosis between humans, machines, and nature, this presentation explores predictive and participatory machine learning (ML) writing tools that expand the possibilities of narrative development and fabulation (Deleuze 2013).

Digital Muse

The association of authenticity and originality with authorship is framed by the Enlightenment Humanist definition of subjectivity as a unitary identity. In contrast, posthumanism (Braidotti 2019; Haraway 1991) reconstitutes what it means to be human and alive today by overcoming the universalist and hierarchical order of anthropocentrism. Digital writing tools powered by machine-learning-based language models, such as Open AI's Generative Pre-trained Transformer (GPT) foster timely discussions about "nonconscious cognition" (Hayles 2017).

Recent experimental apps created by Google's Creative Lab that feed data into GPT-2 allow authors and creators to take a walk or conduct a conversation in the real world with their characters. In what ways are these place-based immersive fictional experiences and interactive interfaces largely modeled on videogames reshaping the creative process? Users of ML writing tools often remark on seeking inspiration from the "oracular" (Coleman 2020) language generated. Can defamiliarized sentences serve as transformative glitches (Russell 2020) that in turn engender new relations that empower?

Desiring Machines

If predictive-text tools are supported by a huge corpus of existing writings, can chance and randomness still disrupt linguistic and cultural conventions, thereby destabilising historically imposed limits on the language of the body and consciousness? In the current interregnum, can text-generating AI be an engine of counter-conduct (Foucault 2007)? Or are these technical systems increasingly cognizing on our behalf, thereby confining us to the limited present? Situated at the convergence of philosophy, science, and art (Deleuze and Guattari 1994), this paper is part of a research and (un)creative writing (Goldsmith 2011) project about the dynamics of agency, simulation, and embodiment in digital storytelling (Murray 2017).

References

- Braidotti, Rosi. 2019. *Posthuman Knowledge*. London: Polity.
- Coleman, Patrick. 2020. "Riding a Racehorse Through a Field of Concepts: What it's like to write a book with an A.I.," accessed January 14, 2021. <https://slate.com/technology/2020/11/interview-k-allado-mcdowell-pharmako-ai.html>.
- Deleuze, Gilles. 2013. *Cinema II: The Time-Image*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. 1994. *What is Philosophy?* New York: Columbia University Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 2007. *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College de France, 1977-1978*. New York: Picador Books.

- Goldsmith, Kenneth. 2011. *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Haraway, Donna J. 1991. *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge.
- Hayles, N. Katherine. 2017. *Unthought: The Power of the Cognitive Nonconscious*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Murray, Janet. 2017. *Hamlet on the Holodeck*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Russell, Legacy. 2020. *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*. London: Verso.

Biography

Carolyn Lau is Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of English at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. She teaches and researches on posthumanism, critical theory, science fiction literature and film, and twentieth- and twenty-first century British and American fiction.