Chris Purdy

Inorganic

"What is it exactly that you do again?" the Problem Child asks.

The class giggles.

This isn't what I was looking for when I asked the class for questions about abstract syntax trees. And this is like the third time she's asked me this same fuckin question this semester.

"I'm a first-year graduate student studying Artificial Intelligence," I answer with my face in my palm. "I study narratology, the science of narrative structure. I'm working on a storytelling program that –"

"Cool." She flashes me her stupid, cheeky grin and lowers her hand. We go through this same routine every week, so it doesn't really bother me anymore.

"Well, then I believe you all have a project due in a week," I remind everyone. "I don't have anything else, so work on that for the remainder of class."

Honestly, I'd rather some of them just go home. I'm sure they would too. It's just that the Fat Bastard requires them to be working on the labs and be connected to the Computer Science department's virtual machines, which they can only access while on school grounds, to receive full credit for the day.

…Well, they have to be doing *something* on the virtual machines.

I return to my computer and open up the administrator's shell in order to check what the students are doing on their accounts. Some of them watch porn the whole time, and they'll likely fail out for damaging school property, but I don't really care.

The Problem Child is running a text editor, but I know damn well she's not doing work. She never does work for this class, unless you count "being an obnoxious fuck and disrupting my class with snide comments" as doing work. God knows what's reflected on that screen of hers. I might check out her work later when she saves her files.

I could spy on them all day. I really could. But I need to get back to work.

I open up LISA, the Fat Bastard's storytelling engine, and prepare to test some machine learning algorithms the he wrote.

I've recently been given the pleasure of maintaining LISA as a part of my graduate studies. It's truly amazing: given a sequence of tropes and narremes (narrative devices and atoms, respectively) I want to see, this machine can give me complete stories outlines, characters,

and situations. The downside is that I have to feed it a lot of hard-coded data in order for it to develop storytelling patterns. LISA's knowledge base size very small, on the order of megabytes, so I'm tasked with supplying data for it to learn from. And, of course, for every *Citizen Kane*, there has to be a *Sharknado* or *The Room* to give examples of what doesn't work.

To have LISA create a character, I need to create a file containing some tropes (taken from TVTropes.org's online trope database) that describe the character I want. For example, if I wanted to make someone like Cloud Strife from *Final Fantasy VII*, I would tell LISA to give me a character that fulfilled requirements for "Angst", "Badass", "The Mentally Disturbed", and "Replacement Goldfish." In short, the machine will generate a character and history based on these criteria.

I can also describe a character arc for a specific character. How do I want the character to develop over the story? I could tell LISA to have this character begin as a "Peggy Sue", in a "Mecha" setting, then have him experience a "Heroic Blue Screen of Death", and it would give me something like Shirogane Takeru's arc from マブラヴ*Alternative*. The possibilities are really endless.

I'm really excited to work with this thing. I love stories and I really want to make some myself... That's why I'm here, to learn storytelling. It'll be a lot of work, though… specifically, I'm tasked with deconstructing real stories and add them to LISA's knowledge base.

"Deconstructions," as the Fat Bastard calls them, entail taking a story and decomposing it into narremes and graphing their interactions. This is the most tedious part of the job, but it has to be done. And who else to do them than some grad student?

As I begin, I hear heavy breathing like two inches from my face.

 "Can we leeeeeeave yet?" the Problem Child asks obnoxious-as-fuck-ly.

"Sure," I say without even looking up. "Have a nice day."

A week passes.

"Why are you studying narratopologigy?" the Problem Child asks.

 "I want to make video games for a living," I tell her. "Specifically, I want to write stories. So studying narratology gives me a reason to learn narrative structure and character building. I want to -" I pause. "But I asked you what a spanning tree was. Do you have an answer?"

"You're supposed to ask me why I'm studying Computer Science," she snarks.

I sigh audibly. "Whatever, get to work, my lecture's over."

I don't really get what this kid's problem is. Why are you in this class if you just don't care? It just pisses me off how little she cares.

I open up LISA to resume work, but I first check my email.

I have a new message from the Fat Bastard himself:

> *Hi Rick,*
>
> *Your past few story deconstructions haven't been top-notch. Are you not interested in this project? We can assign you to another project if you don't like narratology.*
>
> *Why don't you analyze a story you really like? I want you to try a comprehensive dissection of your favorite video game.*

Don't get me wrong, I like working with LISA, but feeding it data is really annoying. Like, reaaaaaaaaally annoying. Isn't there something else I can do? Like, reading stories from LISA and doing quality testing?

Even if I'm not doing exactly what I'm asked, doing something with LISA is productive still, right? I decide to test its story construction capabilities again.

I stick some narremes together and send the inputs into LISA.

Output:

+++++++++++

Abstract.

Genre: Fantasy

Approx. Length: 5,000 words

Age Rating: 13+

Internal Quality Estimate: 6.7

Reception Projection: 7.2

+++++++++++

Summary.

A <strapping, handsome> <25,26,27> *year-old man is forced to recover a/an* <amulet, ring, bracelet> *from an evil* <god, devil, monster> *in order to save his* <mother, father, sister>.

+++++++++

I read through the entire document. This… really isn't that good.

…which sucks on its own, but now I need to access the corresponding data structure and find out what isn't good about it. That's really boring. This isn't the fun part of writing, either. There's gotta be something fulfilling I can do with this thing… I'll think of something later.

I open up the class administration shell to "monitor" the students. Somehow, everyone seems to be working on their assignments… except for the Problem Child.

Not that I'm surprised.

I *am* damn curious what's so fuckin important that she can't do work in class, ever. I check her user directory. There are a bunch of standard text files in here. As I suspected, she hasn't been coding during class. But she has been consistently doing *something* during these discussion sections. But what?

I open "fuck this ta.txt".

+++++++++++

Audrey Reynolds, 10/01/2014

<u>*The Dark Magic*</u>

My name is Raven Schwarz and this is my story. I'm 18 years old with dark, long, beautiful hair that just barely extends to below my waist. My mother and father where both killed by the Dark Wizard, and ever since I've been training to defeat him.

++++++++++++++

Is this really what the Problem Child has been doing? Writing shitty stories? And why "fuck this ta.txt"?

I read through the whole thing.

…

Yeah, this is really bad. But I had no idea this is what she was doing.

LISA can wait for now: I kinda want to read another one of these.

+++++++++++

Audrey Reynolds, 10/04/2014

<u>*The Prince in the Night*</u>

I'm Raven Noir. I'm a little spunky, but not spunky as to send away boys or anything. I just have a little attitude. I'm also the princess of the Kingom of Hollowson.

+++++++++++++

I have this strange, morbid fascination with this.

I know it's really bad, but I don't feel like laughing. This is nothing like anything LISA's put out, in a good way, even though objectively it's all worse.

There are a number of interesting observations I can make about her work.

First of all, the main character is almost always the same self-insert "Mary Sue"-type character. This is almost always used for wish-fulfillment with poor writers.

Second of all, looking at the timestamps of these files, this seems to have been occupying her time for almost all of the semester.

And third of all… the stories have been getting more personal. They all have some gothic theme behind them, but the later stories' tone is noticeably different. Her stories are… sad? Lonely?

I actually don't know what to make of this. Should I approach her? Or is that meddlesome? Her personal affairs shouldn't be any of my business, but I'm just too interested. That annoying girl, who disrupts all of my classes, wrote these?

And why has she been acting out?

…

Why does she have to be so obnoxious in person?

I hear a voice. "Can we -"

"Yeah, go."

I dismiss the class a little early.

I really should go back to working with LISA. The Fat Bastard wants me to deconstruct my favorite stories? I don't really want to, but sitting around isn't going to get it done.

And dwelling too long on the Audrey situation isn't going to help anything.

I just want to be good with storytelling. But this is almost painful.

This past week, I've been dropping the ball when it comes to LISA.

I really don't want to do these deconstructions anymore. The Professor wants me to dissect my favorite stories, but I just can't do that. I've been skirting with writing shallow analyses on stuff I don't really care about, and my quality has been sinking. We've been throwing out a lot of data.

All of this is just… too impersonal.

My favorite stories are not just data points. My enjoyment of these stories is more than a metric, a measure of success. To tear them apart just seems too cruel. I'm fine analyzing them, I really am. But feeding them to LISA like mashed peas is just heartless.

Also, LISA is *not* a person, no matter how much we try. Its stories are just algorithm outputs. I'm not compelled. I respect the Professor, despite calling him a Fat Bastard, and I'm sure he's worked really hard on this, but this is not something I want to do anymore. I'll request a new project.

I've been occupying my time this class reading Audrey's stories again. Even though the quality isn't very high, I'm extremely interested. She still acts like she doesn't care, but with a new perspective, this doesn't seem entirely accurate. But I still don't know *why* she's doing these things.

Anyway, maybe this last story will give me the answers I want:

……….

[…] *"I think what you're doing is really cool," she told him* […]

[…] *"I love stories even though I'm not very good at it"* […]

She's reaching out to me?

[…] *"I wish you would understand me"* […]

[…] *"Why I'm doing these things"* […]

[…] *"I'm lonely, please hear me out"* […]

Is that really what this is?

[…] *"I'm actually just really shy"* […]

A cry for help?

I look to where she's sitting. Everyone else is talking. She's quiet. Doesn't she have friends in this class?

[…] *"I have trouble being honest with people too"* […]

Is this related to her behavior? Why she never acts "normal"?

And then it all clicked. Why she's been acting out, targeting me. Why she's asking about me so much.

Could it be that she just wants to be heard?

By someone who thinks like her?

She has a passion for this, I'm sure. And I think she's acting out to grab my attention, to direct me to her own stories. This base, deeply personal form of self-expression.

No one really understands her. So she has to do this to get people to notice her stories? It's so roundabout.

But I know now. This person needs more attention.

"Hey, Audrey," I announce. "Could you come here for a second?"