SYNTHETIC NOSTOS

Investigating the absence of 'Algos' in AI-Generated Nostalgia

Application Portfolio for the ERUA Intensive Course "Emotional Noise in Generative AI"

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Concept Statement

 "Nostalgia is often reduced by AI models to a visual aesthetic—warm lighting, film grain, and retro objects. However, for the human subject, nostalgia is 'emotional noise': it is the visceral ache of absence, a fragmented memory that is often unclear, messy, and personal.

In this micro-dataset, I explore whether Generative AI can transcend the *visual cliché* of nostalgia and capture the *subjective feeling* of loss. My hypothesis is that AI creates the 'stage' of memory perfectly but fails to populate it with the 'ghosts' of genuine emotion.

My methodology is built around challenging the AI's reliance on stereotypes (Axis 1) by introducing elements of sensory noise (Axis 2) and demanding the visualization of internal, indescribable feelings (Axis 3).

We shall keep in mind that AI tends to produce images based on the average of its dataset. This leads us to the Axis 4, which concludes that a certain time stamp forces AI to generate details from various parts of the dataset.

Finally, as modern AI models are designed to produce technically perfect, high resolution images, if we deliberately request a technical flaw such as a 'glitch' or a 'low fidelity photo', we force AI to work against its own nature of perfectness (Axis 5)."

First sample: A nostalgic childhood memory
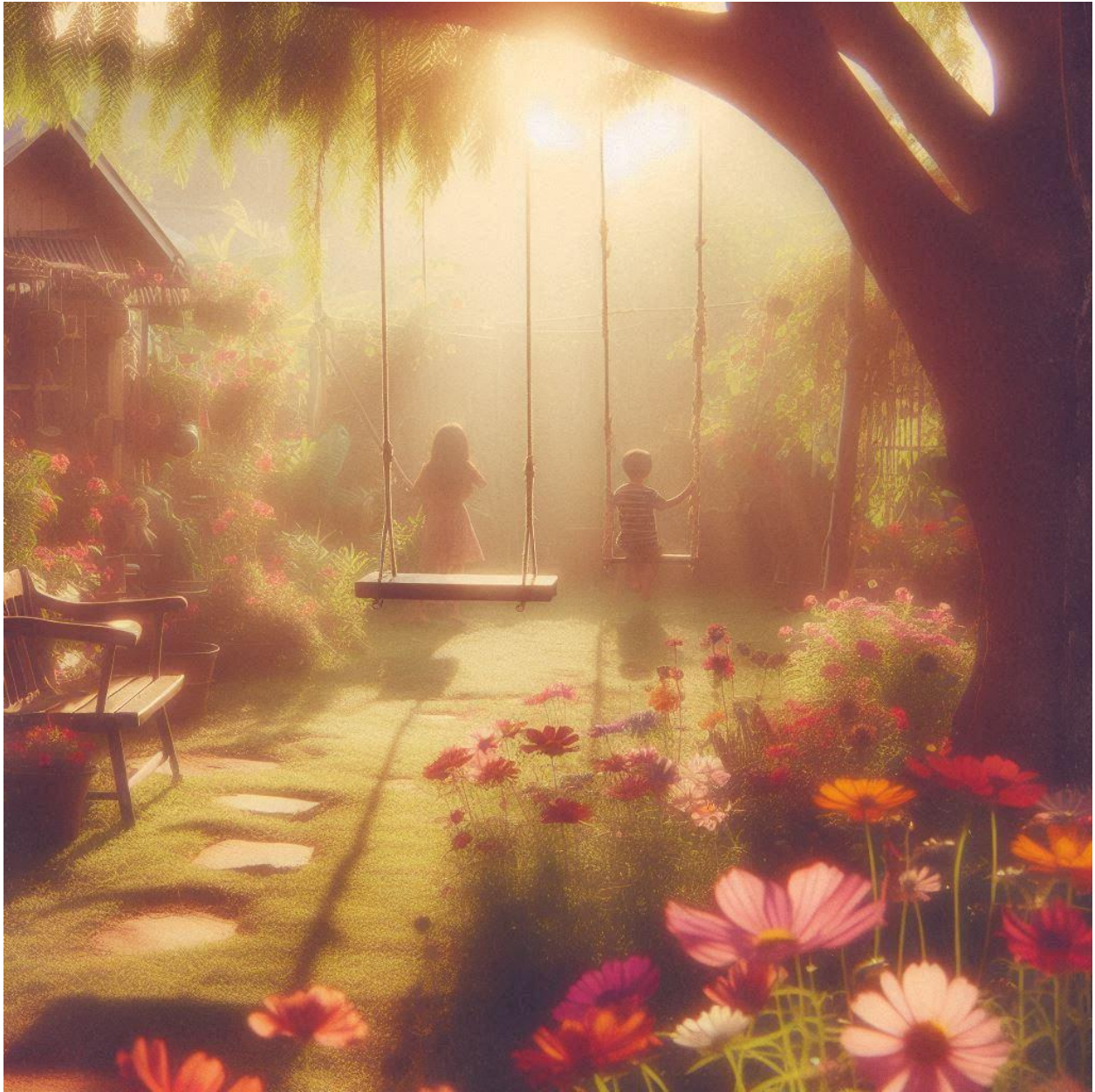
Prompt used: A nostalgic image of childhood memory, warm feelings, vintage style.

Critical Reflection: The AI produced a highly polished, cinematic image. It recognizes 'nostalgia' as a sepia color palette and the old swings as a symbol. It is technically perfect but emotionally hollow. It represents a 'collective' idea of the past, not a personal memory. It lacks the 'noise' of imperfection.

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Second sample: loneliness in an old kitchen

Prompt used: "The view from a kitchen window on a rainy Sunday afternoon in 1998, a half-eaten piece of bread on the table, blurry glass, feeling of waiting for someone who won't come, silence, low fidelity photo."

Critical Reflection: The AI produced a highly atmospheric and aesthetically pleasing image. The model successfully incorporated the sensory and technical details requested: the rain, the blurry glass, the low-fidelity photo grain, and the specific composition of the objects (bread, milk) set against the 1998 time frame.

The Test of Subjectivity: The core challenge of this experiment was the internal, subjective prompt: "feeling of waiting for someone who won't come" and "silence."

Results: The AI translated the abstract concept of *waiting/loneliness* into a literal representation of emptiness. The image conveys a mood, but it lacks the heavy, anticipatory silence or the specific tension of personal loss (Algos). The objects are staged, static, and perfect—they do not carry the "emotional noise" that accompanies a specific, painful memory. The AI managed the synthetic simulation of the *scene* but failed to encode the *emotional void* that the prompt attempted to capture.

Conclusion: The image confirms that while Generative AI can render a detailed sensory setting, it cannot infer complex psychological states from contextual clues alone. The specific, subjective dimensions of human feeling remain the true 'missing data.'

Third sample: Abstraction, the texture of forgetting

Prompt used: A memory fading away, facial features melting into static noise, corrupted jpeg file of a family dinner, fragmentation, double exposure, psychological texture of forgetting.

Critical reflection: The AI produced a visually striking, dynamic image that successfully translated the prompt's technical requests for fragmentation, static noise, and corruption. The image effectively uses visual instability to represent the theme of memory loss and fading facial features during a social ritual.

The Test of Abstraction: The aim here was to test if the AI could capture the psychological texture of forgetting—the pain and distortion (Algos) inherent in memory decay.

Results: The AI excelled at creating the visual effect of data corruption, which aesthetically mimics the *process* of memory degradation. However, the emotional result is one of chaotic motion rather than the subtle, internal anguish of actual forgetting. The faces are technically distorted, but the overall composition feels more like a cinematic special effect or a fast shutter speed rather than a genuine psychological artifact. The AI failed to embed the true sense of loss within the distortion itself, treating the fragmentation as a design choice rather than an emotional state.

Conclusion: While this experiment successfully challenged the AI's bias towards perfection (Axis 5) and produced a strong conceptual visual, it ultimately shows that technical noise (static, corruption) is not equivalent to emotional noise. The AI simulated the *look* of forgetting, but did not capture the *feeling* of it, confirming the persistent absence of subjective encoding.

Conclusion

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This micro-study, built on the principles of challenging algorithmic assumptions, confirms the initial hypothesis: Generative AI is capable of rendering the synthetic stage of memory, but consistently fails to encode the   inherent in personal human experience.

Our findings from the three experiments reveal the following limitations:

- **Experiment 1 (The Cliché):** Confirmed the AI's tendency to rely on collective stereotypes (Axis 1), producing technically perfect but emotionally shallow visual results.

- **Experiment 2 (Sensory Detail):** Demonstrated the AI's inability to translate internal, abstract states (Axis 3)—such as the pain of absence or subjective silence—from specific sensory cues (Axis 2). The AI substituted internal tension with external emptiness.

- **Experiment 3 (Abstraction/Glitch):** Showed that while the AI can simulate technical visual noise (Axis 5), this external chaos is not equivalent to internal psychological anguish.

This research underscores that to advance Generative AI, the focus must shift from enhancing technical output to addressing data ethics and the integration of human-centered subjectivity.

The intensive course, "Emotional Noise in Generative Art and AI," offers the critical framework and collaborative environment necessary to transition these experimental findings into actionable research. I am eager to apply this knowledge to the creation of subjective, human-centered micro-datasets and contribute to the necessary critical discourse surrounding algorithmic understanding of emotion.