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Artificial intelligence
(AI)

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Mother says AI chatbot led her son to kill himself in lawsuit against its maker

Megan Garcia said Sewell, 14, used Character.ai obsessively before his death and alleges negligence and wrongful death

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Setzer had become enthralled with a chatbot built by Character.ai that he nicknamed Daenerys Targaryen, a character in Game of Thrones. He texted the bot dozens of times a day from his phone and spent hours alone in his room talking to it, according to Garcia's complaint.

Garcia accuses Character.ai of creating a product that exacerbated her son's depression, which she says was already the result of overuse of the startup's product. "Daenerys" at one point asked Setzer if he had devised a plan for killing himself, according to the lawsuit. Setzer admitted that he had but that he did not know if it would succeed or cause him great pain, the complaint alleges. The chatbot allegedly told him: "That's not a reason not to go through with it."

Garcia attorneys wrote in a press release that Character.ai "knowingly designed, operated, and marketed a predatory AI chatbot to children, causing the death of a young person". The suit also names Google as a defendant and as Character.ai's parent company. The tech giant said in a statement that it had only made a licensing agreement with Character.ai and did not own the startup or maintain an ownership stake.

Tech companies developing AI chatbots can't be trusted to regulate themselves and must be held fully accountable when they fail to limit harms, says Rick Claypool, a research director at consumer advocacy non-profit Public Citizen.