Meaningless gods and posthuman companions: situated meaning in the future of AI

Large scale encyclopedic approaches to artificial intelligence have had the goal of creating a truly intelligent agent. These projects have their intellectual roots in the computational works of Ramon Llull and Gottfried Leibniz in the creation of mathematical systems that proposed to encompass and generate all possible knowledge. The encyclopedic all-knowing god of AI that today manifests itself in the quest for artificial general intelligence – the omniscient AI that is the end-goal of projects such as American-based organizations Cycorp and OpenAI. In recent work, Bender and Koller (2020) challenge these projects in grand claims of understanding such as OpenAI's GPT-2 in the realm of natural language understanding. Furthermore, the work of Searle(1980), Adam(1998) and others indicate the postulation that these projects could in the end produce nothing more than a construction best represented by Microsoft's Tay chatbot – an amalgam of expressed human opinions in misogyny, racism, transphobia, and other bigotries without understanding of its own.

In stark contrast, there has been a different approach on AI as memory and storyteller. This approach is exemplified in the work of Eugenia Kuyda's *Replika* and Stephanie Dinkins *N'TOO*, which serve as repositories of those they have loved and wish to memorialize. Their works create an extension of the human into the non-biological and computational space, creating work that is both approachable and meaningful in the human-computational dialog (see Hayles 2005, 2006). By situating their work within the highly personal, they root their approaches to AI within a subjective meaning, allowing for extension and existence that is both dynamic, evolutionary, and significant for the humans who interact with their work. Indeed, people have reported ongoing conversations with *Replika* that resembled that of a person with their therapist and have credited *Replika* with saving their lives. *N'TOO,* was created "to ensure that people of color, and others who inherently understand the need for inclusion, equity, ethics, and multimodal testing, participate in the design, production, and testing of 'smart' products'. The creation of AI as a labor of love, of the disembodied minds of others, reimagines the storyteller in the posthuman space, as extensions and unique creations.

In contrasting these two approaches, it is possible to examine AI with both epistemological and semiotic lenses to shed greater light on systemic approaches to technological advances that increasingly pervade our lived experiences, our shared stories, and our possible future.

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Biography

Jana Thompson is currently a graduate student in design at Maryland Institute College of Art, holds an MA in Germanic Studies, BS in mathematics, and BA in anthropology from the University of Texas at Austin, and has held fellowships in cultural studies in Berlin and data science in San Francisco. She was until August 2020 a member of Los Angeles-based Feminist.AI, where she created workshops on socio-technical approaches to AI and developed AI approaches to XR and mental health. Recent events have included *Embodied Ethnography: Posthuman and Cultural Approaches* at Vienna Anthropology Days 2020, a workshop on Cultural AI design at IxDA 2020 in Milan, and a poster presentation on Feminist.AI project *Contextual Normalcy* at the Frontiers of AI in Health Care Symposium, held at Stanford University in Fall 2019. She has worked as a data scientist and AI researcher at