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COMS340 New Media
April 2, 2023

Notion AI: Redefining the Ideal User

For the first two and a half years of my university career, I have meticulously tracked my assignments and due dates using tools like Microsoft OneNote and Google Sheets. This past semester, however, my primary organizational tool has been Notion (Fig. 1). Notion, which describes itself as “your wiki, docs, & projects. Together. Notion is the connected workspace where better, faster work happens” (Notion), was first released in 2018. Since then, it has grown in popularity among professionals and students alike. Many students, including myself, use Notion to track assignments and due dates and even to take notes. I personally made the switch to Notion due to its aesthetic interface and wide-ranging customizability. After spending hours designing my pages, I now have a relatively seamless and enjoyable tool for keeping my school work organized. However, upon reflection, I have decided that Notion may not have been created for users like me.

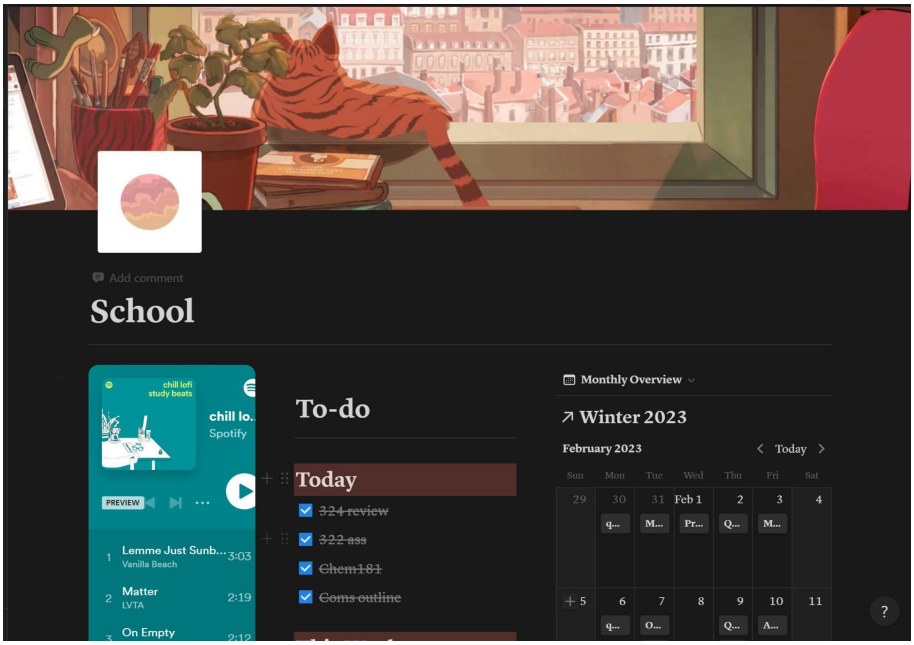

Fig. 1

In February of 2023, Notion released Notion AI to all users. With the help of Notion AI, users can “access the limitless power of AI, right inside Notion. Work faster. Write better. Think bigger” (Notion). From this basic description, Notion AI seems like the perfect tool for any user. In practice, Notion AI can find action items, brainstorm ideas, create blog posts and press releases, write recruiting and sales emails, and more (Fig. 2-3). With just the click of a button, users can delegate “anything” to the AI, perfectly embodying North America’s work-based culture. This connection between Notion AI and present-day culture is not random; “technology neither determines society’s trajectory nor is it symptomatic of social change. Instead, technologies are designed, experienced and further developed within a culture that shapes and is influenced by them”(Light, Burgess and Duguay, 887). Notion AI was designed to fit into this work-centric culture while also mutually shaping the culture to allow it to continue to focus on productivity. While all this seems great for the professional user, not all users benefit.

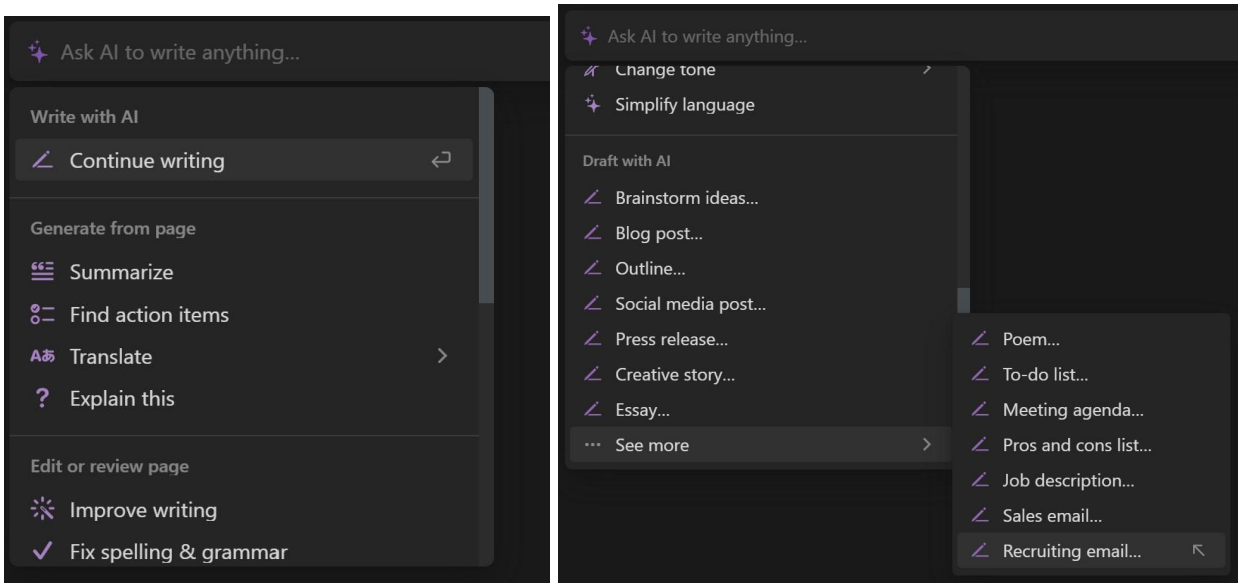

Fig. 2, Fig. 3

In their discussion of *The Walkthrough Method*, Light, Burgess and Duguay describe software applications as “a subset of computer programs: they are computer programs that solve

particular, often singular, user needs" (884). Notion is a software application that solves the user need for better organization in the workplace and in one's personal life. More specifically, Notion AI solves the user "need" for increased productivity through the delegation of work to the machine in the professional setting. Although society has created uses for Notion outside of the professional workplace, such as tracking personal reading or planning a vacation, Notion continues to focus on professional users. The reasoning for this could boil down to Notion's environment of expected use.

Light, Burgess and Duguay describe an application's environment of expected use as "how the app provider anticipates [the app] will be received, generate profit or other forms of benefit and regulate user activity"(884). Notion's environment of expected use is among workplace professionals. We can see this in its self-description as a "workplace where better, faster work happens" (Notion) but also in Notion AI. Notion AI codifies and identifies users as professionals, not just ordinary people. Before the introduction of Notion AI, casual users could benefit from most, if not all, of Notion's features. These features included embedding new pages, creating to-do lists, tables, calendars, and more. Any user, professional or otherwise, could find uses and benefits from these features and could make Noiton their own. Now, however, it is clear that Notion believes professional use is what will generate profit. Thus the company creates features tailored to that subset of users, regulating users overall to use Notion for professional, not personal, reasons.

Notion catering to professional users with the addition of AI shows how applications embed cultural values and expected uses into their designs. These values shape what the application means, does, and how it (and we) act in the world. In today's capitalist society, productivity means money. Thus our culture values more productive workers. Similarly, Notion

assumes their user wishes to be more productive, as seen by their tagline, which coins Notion as a workspace "where better, faster work happens" (Notion). Notion AI "embeds" our capitalist cultural values by delegating work to technology and allowing users to increase their overall productivity. Notion AI's expected uses are to increase productivity, organization, effectiveness, and to save time. So, through the introduction of Notion AI, Notion has managed to further embed their expected uses into the application's design by, quite literally, embedding productivity-encouraging AI into their software.

Through this literal embedding, Notion AI does more than just expect users to delegate to AI; it actively encourages users to do so. In Jenny Davis's *Mechanisms of Affordance*, Davis explains how "[technological] objects afford in varying degrees, and their effects are exerted with differing levels of force"(64) and proposes a framework that focuses on the importance of "asking *how* instead of *what*"(85) when analyzing affordances of a given technology. In applying Davis's framework to Notion AI and exploring *how* Notion makes the AI feature available, I concluded that Notion AI is a technology that makes *requests*, *encourages*, and also *allows*.

In describing different mechanisms of affordance, Davis explains how "technologies place bids on users in the form of *requests* and *demands*. Technologies respond to users in the form of *encouragement*, *discouragement*, and *refusal*"(80). Additionally, technologies can *allow*. Davis says that "technological objects *encourage* some line of action when that line of action is made easy and appealing" (72). Notion encourages the use of AI by prompting users to "press 'space' for AI"(fig. 4) as soon as users enter a new line. Similarly, Notion AI encourages users to use Notion for professional purposes by proposing business-related tasks using business language, such as "action items"(fig. 2), and simultaneously encourages the cultural values of efficiency and time management.

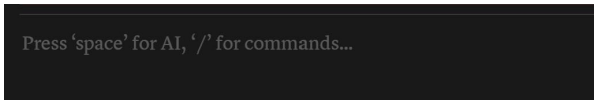

Fig. 4

Additionally, a technology requests by "[emphasizing] a particular set of actions, deemphasizing other action possibilities"(66), "the technology persuades in one direction but leaves alternative options open"(67). When entering a new line, Notion primarily prompts users to use AI, thus emphasizing that use and persuading in "one direction." However, although deemphasized, "'/' for commands'(Fig. 4) is still an open alternative action. It is also important to note that Notion does not demand the use of AI at any point, and the technology fully *allows* users to never use the AI feature if they so desire.

From a less analytical point of view, we can consider Notions governance. "An app's governance involves how the app provider seeks to manage and regulate user activity to sustain their operating model and fulfill their vision. Governance is reflected in the app's rules and guidelines, which place boundaries around the types of activity that users are able to conduct, and even the types of users allowed on an app (Light et al., 890). Notion does not profit from the casual user but from professional users who have to pay a fee in order to use Notion in the workplace. Thus Notion AI acts as an effort to slightly regulate user activity. In releasing a feature that only benefits the true target user, Notion is telling casual users that this app isn't for them. Although no strict regulations or boundaries appear, Notion can use its interface to nudge its users to the conclusion that Notion is for the professional space through *requests* and *encouragement*, as described above. In other words, it all comes back to our cultural values of productivity and income.

As Light, Burgess, and Duguay explain, "apps matter because they reflect our cultural values, bring multiple actors including users, developers and advertisers into an interaction space

and communicate meanings that shape our everyday practices" (896). Although many casual users have created a use for Notion outside of the workplace, Notion does not create an interaction space that includes them. With Notion AI, the actors at play are the developers, who created the technology, the advertisers, who wish to profit off of professional users, and the users who will actually value the AI feature. In neglecting the casual user, Notion is using its AI feature to perpetuate capitalistic standards. They do this by searching for profit and focusing on increasing user productivity and organization to create (and sell) a “better” worker.

Despite reaching a population of over 30 million users in 2023 so far, Notion boasts only 4 million customers (David), customers being those who pay to use Notion. This means that only 13% of Notions users are using Notion to its full potential in a workplace setting. And more importantly, in our society, this means that Notion is only profiting off of 13% of its users. Statistics like these help to explain the necessity of introducing Notion AI. By creating features targeted at professional individuals that perpetuate capitalistic standards, Notion is working to redefine its target user as a customer.

Overall, the introduction of Notion AI has worked to reclaim Notion as a professional space by “[regulating] user activity to sustain their operating model and fulfill their vision”(Light et al., 890). Notion AI was clearly created for the professional user, offering little to no value for the casual Notion-er, and the introduction of the AI tool brings to light the capitalistic cultural values and meanings that are embedded within the program.

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