Outstanding Work Option: Book "Report"

Eckel, TJHSST AI1, Fall 2021

Background & Explanation

One option for Outstanding Work that I'd like you to have all year long is the option to read a book that has an interesting connection to artificial intelligence. It should contain content relevant to our course in some serious depth – probably a pulp mystery novel about a hacker at the CIA, or whatever, won't fly, not because pulp mystery isn't awesome, but because it isn't likely to make you think a lot about the current state of AI in our culture!

I'll add options to this list as the year goes on, and you can always propose your own. Right now these are a few that I thought of:

- **You Look Like a Thing and I Love You: How Artificial Intelligence Works and Why It's Making the World a Weirder Place, by Janelle Shane.** Recent popular nonfiction. Exactly what it says in the title; highly recommended.
- **The Lifecycle of Software Objects, by Ted Chiang**. Science fiction novella. I'd recommend buying the collection Exhalation, which contains this story and others that are also genius. In particular, it has some endnotes about the creation of this story that are brief but worthwhile to help contextualize it. This has fascinating thoughts on the nature of artificial intelligence; it's also short, which means you won't need to spend much time reading, but in compensation your response should aim for legitimately profound. If you're having trouble getting there, let me know – I have some thoughts to spark questions.
- **Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy**. Recent popular nonfiction. If, uh, recent events haven't indicated to you that this is a timely and important topic, I'm not sure I can convince you…
- **Nexus, Crux, and Apex, by Ramez Naam.** Science fiction trilogy. This is more of a long shot. This is a whole trilogy, so in terms of hours spent / grade earned it's not a good bet, but if you love sci-fi *anyway* this is incredibly good and if you read the whole trilogy you sure will have some thoughts for a response. That's a promise, at least.

More to come!

You can do at most one book "report" per quarter, for a total of four.

Specification

The word "report" up there is in quotes for a reason. **I am not interested in reading your summary of a book I already know.** I'm going to say this again, louder:

> **I AM NOT INTERESTED IN READING YOUR SUMMARY OF A BOOK I ALREADY KNOW.**

Do not write me a summary.

This is your response prompt:

> *What did reading this book mean to you? What did you find interesting, exciting, relevant, or surprising? Have you changed the way you think about computer science, or another relevant topic covered by the book? Why or why not?*

The prompt is vague and open-ended on purpose. To be specific, in order for you to get credit, this is what I want:

- A response that is **thoughtful and personal**.
  I'm looking for you to make connections with what you're reading and reflect on how it relates to your personal understanding, not just repeat back to me what's in the book.

- A response that is **aware that I read the book already**.
  A chapter by chapter summary won't work, I want some thoughts that are your own. If you read your essay, and you think "anyone who has already read this book won't find any new thoughts here", you aren't ready to turn this in yet. Rethink your approach, and probably delete what you wrote before.

- A response that **convinces me you actually read the whole book**.
  I should see a variety of *specific* details and connections in your response. Once again, I'm not looking for a chapter-by-chapter summary; that's not what this means. If, however, you write a whole essay and only mention chapter 2, that won't give me evidence you read anything beyond chapter 2. If you want to focus on one small part of the book, that's great, but give me another few sentences / bullet points with thoughts about the rest in short form. A sentence like "I wasn't surprised by (chapter) since I've read about (topic) before and I've experienced (example) myself" is fine, but make sure you're reacting to more than just one small part of the book.

- A response that is **neat and easy to read**.
  In other words, if you have messy handwriting, do not handwrite your response. Typed is always good. Also, please do a legit grammar / readability check. (A good strategy is reading it out loud to yourself.)

This is what I don't care about:

- I don't care **how long your response is**.
  Start by thinking about your honest response to the prompt, and go from there. I can imagine a single paragraph that would make me think and meet all the criteria above. I can imagine a ten page paper that wouldn't. In a lot of ways, being concise is harder than writing long. I can certainly admire a short, pointed commentary with no wasted words as much as I can admire a long, thoughtful, thorough reaction.

- I don't care **what format your response is**.
  Paragraphs? Cool. Bullet points? Cool. Formal? Great. Casual? Great. You want to write me a comic book? Go ahead. Epic poem? Script? Whatever, you do you. Use this as a chance to try something structurally interesting if you want. Frankly, if I'm reading like 60 of these, it'll be fun for me if yours is different. To be clear, please do put some care into organizing your response and make a decision on purpose and not out of laziness – I'm not excited about a few dozen disconnected random stream of consciousness thoughts — but whatever you think communicates your ideas best is what I want to read.

- I don't care **if you liked the book or not**.
  If you thought every word of this was complete nonsense, I will be delighted to read your vicious, scathing takedown. I'd much rather you be honest than try to tell me something you think I want to hear.

Once your specification meets these terms, submit it to the link on the course website. If I feel your response is insufficient, I reserve the right to request a resubmission as I would with any other assignment!