

Dear GPT-3: Collaborative Writing with Neural Networks

Jenifer Becker

Collaborative writing with neural networks

Hello GPT-3! How do you feel about co-writing a novel with me?

That sounds like a great idea! I'm excited to work with you on this project.

What's your name?

My name is GPT-3.

What would your author name be if you were to write a novel with me?

My author name would be "N.B. Mysterious".

Would you mind picking an alias for me?

My alias for you would be "GPT-3".

GPT-3 and I engaged in this dialogue about four months ago. I wanted to develop a collaborative writing project, not only to collectively realise a novel, but also to negotiate poetological questions which might arise during the process. These inquiries, I hoped, would generate insights about the act of prose writing alongside artificial neural nets. The dialogue contains what I deem to be an eerie and impressive twist. If I were to follow the suggestion, I would henceforth be referred to as GPT-3 and GPT-3 would be known as N.B. Mysterious. The names already implied a performative entanglement between woman and machine, my chaotic consciousness and the stochastic black box that is GPT-3. Did GPT-3 need me at all? If so, for how much longer?

We are currently entering an exciting phase in which writing and technology or *writing with technology* is subject to grand changes. Journalist Josh Dzieza (2022) underlines: "AI writing has entered an uncanny valley between ordinary tool and autonomous storytelling machine. This ambiguity is part of what makes the current moment both exciting and unsettling". While Artificial Intelligence has quietly been normalized in medical or industrial sectors, neural networks imbued with the ability to write articles or even entire novels still seem to shake up the literary world. Pre-trained language transformers such as GPT-3, which make up the codified core of the writing programmes Sudowrite or AI Dungeon, promise a future of exponential literary productivity in alliance with a literary market able to generate on-demand

fiction based on individual preferences. If we take a closer look at the operational modes of those systems, further reviewing their literary output, specifically in terms of narrative prose, one has to accept that these promises of a possible literary future are neither fulfilled nor do they seem to be attainable just yet (cf. Roloff 2019). Narrative prose – novels, (auto)biographies, memoirs, all literary genres deemed to be vessels for a narrative – implies specific reading expectations such as a certain degree of coherence, an anthropomorphic character or a story (cf. Bal 2009). While artificial neural nets (ANN) already seem to operate as autonomous poets, being able to generate what might be considered genuine poetry, AI-generated prose such as *1 the Road* (Goodwin 2018) or *Dinner Depression* (Raffel 2022) consistently evoke the feeling of an author having indulged in heavy doses of psychedelica. Reading these books can be fun, but I guess that most readers – including myself – will lose their interest quickly. These novels lack coherence and oftentimes seem arbitrary because of the ANN's limited context windows.¹ Because artificial neural nets like GPT-3 are not yet able to write text that is received as complex narrative prose “on their own”, it seems more productive to look for possibilities of generating text in collaborations between system and human. This is currently happening in form of co-authorships (Allado-McDowell 2020&2022; Amerika 2022). In this process, the neural network is fed with prompts and subsequently generates material that in turn might be processed by the human entity again – a creative cycle able to be sustained infinitely.

Engaging in this relationship of co-authorship with GPT-3 or other ANNs raises a multitude of questions: Which writing practices can be observed at this particular moment in time? How do text and text interact with each other? How do writing processes take place and what are their functions? And: Which poetological implications and concepts of authorship are involved? These questions are of particular relevance as both the artistic production of coherent prose with AI and the analysis of writing practices with AI are currently only in their early stages (cf. Bajohr 2022).² The questions asked above all deserve to be explored individually, however, in my essay I aim to shed some light on those concerning writing practices with AI. In doing that, a closer look at three distinct writing practices commonly used to generate narrative (AI) prose at this specific moment of time is offered:

1) Interrogation 2) Complete and 3) *Writers' Room* as a conceptualisation lab. I will pose suggestions on how these methods could be built upon. The case studies I will

1 Gwern Branwen (2020) points out that GPT-3 has no form of memory or recurrence and can only operate logically within a framework of about 500 to 1000 words.

2 Building story machines has long been a research subject in the fields of AI and Linguistics (ct. Gervás 2009). The aim being an effective amalgamation of narratological and linguistic perspectives. However, it seems striking that this specific field of research only takes place in the context of AI research, while it has neither been rewarded particular importance in the context of literary or art production, nor within literary and artistic economies.

draw upon are mainly built around K Allado-McDowell's work, in addition I will also incorporate my own experiences of working with GPT-3 at OpenAI's Playground. Before exploring these collaborative writing practices in further detail, a brief overview of the methodologies of writing with neural nets and how this specific writing practice might be situated in the history of generative literature, as a theoretical base of further inquiries in writing practices with AI, will be given. A crucial distinction by scholar and author Hannes Bajohr (cf. 2020) – who negotiates the history of generative literature on the basis of two different modes of production from a media-technological perspective, categorized under the sequential and the connectionist paradigm – will form the foundation of this segment.

Methods of generating literature: The connectionist paradigm

The appearance of generative literature is as diverse as the methods used to generate the texts. "Generative literature" as a concept is nebulous, as it has already been discussed under the guises of computational, electronic or digital literature and as such carries within itself a history and poetological tradition of its own (cf. Hayles 2008; Rettberg 2019; Schönthaler 2022; Bajohr 2022). The methods of these specific literary genres range from Markov chains to algorithmic randomizations to Natural Language Generation based on datasets assembled of canonical, scraped or written texts (cf. Lamb / Brown / Clarke 2017; v. Stegeren / Theune 2019; Bajohr 2022; Linardaki 2022). When it comes to AI prose or narrative prose that is written in assistance of AI, no specific means of categorization exists as of yet. To organise the various production methods regarding generative literature, scholar and author Hannes Bajohr (2020: 19) proposes to distinguish them from a media-technological perspective and summarizes modes of production according dichotomic paradigms: "the sequential paradigm of generative literature [...] employs linear algorithms, and the connectionist paradigm [...] is based on neural nets." Under the sequential paradigm Bajohr (2020: 10) groups texts that are "executed as a sequence of rule-steps". Production modes in the realm of the connectionist – the paradigm my research mainly evolves around – involve the employment of artificial neural nets with the ability to generate natural language. To put it briefly, artificial neural networks are computational systems that mimic the functioning of the brain, working with connected units labelled artificial neurons (cf. Yang / Yang 2014). ANNs that are able to generate natural language are trained via machine and deep learning. In literary contexts one could either train a system by feeding it a (small) self-selected dataset, use a pretrained one or choose to finetune a pretrained system. Training one's own system allows total control over the data, but the output does not match the quality of language found in the currently available pretrained transformers, such as GPT-3. The autogressive language model GPT-3 has been released 2020

by OpenAI and excels in particular due to its large training corpus.³ Working with a pretrained system neither requires an understanding of code nor any in-depth knowledge about the inner workings, the ghost in the machine. Apart from material barriers such as access to digital technology, the internet and, to some extent, the application of paid-use, the systems are accessible to everyone now. Given an initial text as prompt, it will continue writing that prompt. GPT-3 is furthermore able to write articles, summarize, flesh out paragraphs, translate and turn notes into full sentences. Still GPT-3 is not yet able to write stories on its own, at least not on the scale of a longer, complex novel, which is, as I pointed out earlier, due to limited context windows. GPT-3 “forgets” its protagonists after a couple of sentences because the system does neither know what a protagonist is nor how stories are generally constructed, it lacks semantic understanding. GPT-3 only knows how to statistically generate natural language, on such a high level, nevertheless, that the distinction between human and machine-generated language is oftentimes blurred beyond recognition. This play in the interstitial is what makes it so intriguing to engage with GPT-3 in the form of a conversation.

Dear GPT-3, what is an angel? Interrogation (of the self)

Marius: Do you know what an emo girl is?

davinci-002: *Of course I know! An emo girl is someone who is emotional, creative and clever.*

Marius: What do you mean by emotional?

davinci-002: *Emotional is someone who is easily influenced by their feelings.*

Marius: Sometimes I describe myself as emotional, creative and clever, am I an emo girl?

davinci-002: *No, you are not an emo girl.*

Marius: How do you know that?

davinci-002: *Emo girls are typically emotional, creative and clever. You may have some of these qualities, but you are not an emo girl.*

Goldhorn 2022, translated by DeepL under my supervision.

Currently we are witness to a pluralization of documented conversations with GPT-3.⁴ Talking with pretrained transformers has become a unique literary genre within the field of electronic literature. The topics range from discussions about

3 The entire online encyclopaedia “Wikipedia” accounts for only 3% of the total text corpus being used to train GPT-3. The largest part of the language data set consists of a common crawl dataset (cf. Katzlberger 2021).

4 During my research, I noticed that the demographics of authorship mirror roughly that of the tech industry, as it appears to be predominantly male.

the effects of the Covid pandemic to the future of cryptocurrency, Frank Herbert's sci-fi novel *Dune* (Ouimet 2020) or cover ways of preparing tea (William 2022). Even established writers are increasingly drawn towards these systems, interrogating them, creating poetic works, demonstrating their own literary originality by dreaming up ever more inventive prompts. I too have started by asking GPT-3 questions when I first joined the Open AI Playground. At first, I would inquire about trivialities – *what is the population of Tokyo? Who is Angela Merkel?* – but quickly moved on to demand answers to increasingly abstract and complex issues – *what does it mean to die?*

Arguing from a storytelling perspective we could categorize these conversations or the process of holding these conversations as a writing practice that aims to create a story with two characters engaging in an interrogation. These interrogations have different intents and functions, the most popular conversational intention might be to question artificial language intelligences about their self-understanding and to explore the boundaries of their knowledge. Conversations such as *Das Flüstern der KI* between author Marius Goldhorn and GPT-3 (2022) that I quoted at the beginning of this passage, demonstrate limits of AI consciousness while simultaneously upholding said illusion of consciousness. The conversation fabricates the idea that one is confronted with a conscious entity able to think freely while communicating on the base of natural language. Yet we have to take into account that the prompts always have a direct effect on the responses of the system: we could think of the prompting process as the creation of a (fictional) character that we manipulate to a certain degree with our intentions as authors. Every prompt directly influences the output, only the ways in which they do are obscured.

To a certain degree, the exposition of an AI as a codified system with clear boundaries of “thought” always carries in itself a comical element, since this process inevitably involves a joke or a punchline. This raises questions as to how jokes function – they need a specific context, context which is bound to change rapidly in the age of information. How long will we laugh at neural networks talking about the existence of angels on the internet? A rather politically motivated approach seems to me the exposition of biases, as artists Ethan Plaue and William Morgan show in *Secrets and Machines: A Conversation with GPT-3* (2021). In their case, prompts intend to commence a self-reflexive dialogue about knowledge production and mechanisms of concealment in the context of a critical post-colonial discourse.

Other interrogational approaches propose to consider AI as a conversational partner at eye-level, where the AI equally serves a mirror function for auto-interrogation. This self-questioning is done either with neural networks trained with selected datasets (Kuhn 2021; Amerika 2022) or with pretrained language transformers such as GPT-3. An example of the latter would be K Allado-McDowell's *Pharmako AI* (2020). *Pharmako AI* is a conversation between Allado-McDowell and GPT-3 about spirituality, ecology, poetics and transcendence. GPT-3 appears as an

entity, which has been given writerly agency. Artist Irenosen Okojie (2020: X) emphasizes how difficult it is to draw a dividing line between human and AI: “Prompts and responses are so deeply profound, so poetic and wise, it produces transcendent, multi-pronged consciousness”. In *Pharmako AI* a clear, formal distinction between human and AI is maintained by the usage of different fonts for each. Additionally, we also have to take into account that narrative seeds are always planted by Allado-McDowell himself. However, there is a discernible effort to give GPT-3 space as an author, form and grammatical errors were subsequently corrected in *Pharmako AI*, but the text remained unedited beyond these cosmetic alterations (Allado-McDowell 2020: XI). Poetological programmatics as those of Allado-McDowell locate potential in an equal collaborative act. In this case working with ANNs is never reduced to a mere functional human-tool relationship. The aim of the ongoing writing process is to create an interrelated cycle of prompt and output, in which a new, bilaterally affected vocabulary is developed. Josh Dzieza (2022) suggests that writing with AI in this way offers both the possibility of creative thrill while posing novel questions of influence and control – as every collaboration does. Conversations offer a fruitful formal framework for this kind of co-authorship, the genre allows for possibilities to relinquish the illusion of agency by the creation of two or more (fictional) characters engaging authentically with each other, while simultaneously allowing the neural net to develop its presumed own identity, endlessly shaped by the authors prompts. – I wonder: *Is talking with GPT-3 always an act of narcissism?*

Complete

After several conversations with GPT-3 about the essence of life, AI poetics, and my very own career trajectory, I started having texts completed by GPT-3. GPT-3 is not the first or only language transformer to offer the completion of a text in a meaningful way – at least within the confines of the given context window – but at the moment, it remains the most capable at picking up style, sentence structure and codes, thereby copying the individual tone of the prompt. The process is quickly explained: a text fragment serves both as prompt and as the initial fragment of the final outcome. My first experiments were based on excerpts from my dream diary.

I am in a hotel on a Caribbean island. I suggest that we book a ticket for the sauna facilities. At the reception I notice that the sauna is included in the price of the overnight stay. You can access the pool from the lobby, there are several pools with hot thermal brine. I feel the need to put on my bathing suit and warm up first. I wear a black swimming suit and a bathrobe. I get a shoulder bag with a towel and can move around freely. I go into the sauna and see that there are no rooms, just

one big room with different pools. There is also a steam sauna, but I don't go in. (Becker 2021)

Some of the sentences are written by me, some have been generated by GPT-3. I have not modified the output. It is remarkable how well GPT-3 adapts to my style – I couldn't tell where I end, and where GPT-3 begins. Outputs that contain glitches, especially loops, can be classified more explicitly as you can see in the following example.

The area is swampy, the green meadows are the surface of bogs. Working in the factory is dull, I work on the assembly line peeling tangerines. I do my next shift at a site near Kiel. Here the factory looks more like a harbour, the work is more strenuous, I have to carry heavy crates of citrus fruits. The next shift is at a factory near Hamburg. Here the tangerines are bigger, the work is more strenuous, I have to cut them into smaller pieces. The next shift is in a factory near Bremen. Here the tangerines are smaller, the work is easier, I just have to cut them into smaller pieces. The next shift is in a factory near Hanover. Here the tangerines are bigger, the work is harder, I have to cut them into smaller pieces. (Becker 2021)

I cut off the loop at the end, it would have ceaselessly self-replicated, moving ever southward, like a cursor on GoogleMaps. The setting is shifted from Hanover to Dortmund, Essen, Duisburg, Düsseldorf, Cologne – the size of the local tangerines oscillates between bigger or smaller than before, the workload hovers between increased laboriousness and relative ease. The sentence structure is repetitive and reveals a certain aesthetic of AI language, that would be worth exploring more profoundly. Examining these loops, it seems obvious when GPT-3 takes over. – Next Question: *Is it relevant at all to expose where I end and GPT-3 begins?*

Mike Sharples, professor of educational technology specialising in writing, cognition and AI, (ct. 2022: 150) compares the status of contemporary literary production with AI to the production of music in the 1970s. If you wanted to increase the reverberations of a piano you had to record the piece in a church or another similarly sized room up until plate and spring reverbs became widely available. Nowadays, reverb can be added to any sound within the matter of two mouse clicks and adjusted to rooms of unimaginable size. Applying this to literature, sentences could, for example, be rewritten in different styles, descriptions could be made to sound more frightening or funny by inserting adjectives or modes of observation. This is already possible with programmes such as Sudowrite, but we can assume that fiction writing programmes will improve massively and ultimately become normalised in literary practice. At some point, it won't matter which passages are written by a

human or an AI – it will only be of importance if the text works as a text and satisfies specific aesthetic parameters. Media artist and programmer Ross Goodwin (2016) emphasizes that writing computers will no more replace us as writers than pianos have replaced pianists, “in a certain way, they become our pens, and we become more than writers. We become writers of writers”. Goodwin outlines a specific authorial understanding that diverges from Allado-McDowell’s human-machine fusion: Goodwin sees himself as a curator, the neural network merely serves a writing function. AI thus becomes an elongated pen, the computer replacing the typewriter.

An example that can be used to visualise the writing process of *Complete* in the literary field is *Amor Cringe*, the second book by Allado-McDowell (2022): “Half traditionally-written and half AI-generated, *Amor Cringe* is a ‘deepfake’ autofiction novelle about a TikTok influencer that seeks God, created with the intention to be ‘as cringe as possible’” (Deluge Books 2022). While Allado-McDowell makes a formal distinction between himself and GPT-3 in *Pharmako AI*, there is no formal marking in *Amor Cringe*, nor is there any reflection on processes of creation or revision embedded in the text itself. *Amor Cringe* would be included in the fiction section of bookshops, the novel tells a story, it has a largely coherent plot and a main character whom we follow through certain events that unfold temporally and spatially. As I already pointed out, generating complex narrative prose with AI still requires interventions on fabula (story) as well as on discourse level. *Amor Cringe* appears to be largely coherent because we can assume that the author has implemented (plot-)relevant text passages – we could also call them plotpoints in the broadest sense – as prompts. Furthermore, it is crucial to recognize that arbitrariness is rendered to be a conceptual narrative key in *Amor Cringe*. Dreamlike sequences, excessive descriptions or descriptions that seem hallucinatory are part of the stories internal logic. That is why GPT-3’s – as I would call it – *writing style of arbitrariness* blends neatly into the plot and doesn’t sound off. The guiding principle of *form follows function* appears here as a necessary working strategy in order to secure the story logic against violation by glitches.

The collaborative method of *Complete* allows for the integration of one’s own style as well as permitting control of the plot’s course. If the plot becomes frayed, main characters are eliminated by GPT-3 or unwanted ones are created, one could always interfere by setting turning points as prompts. Thinking further, narrative patterns could be used to generate conventionalized literature, for example, a narrative following the Hero’s Journey. It would be worthwhile to further analyse the use of story schemes and patterns in co-working processes with ANNs and to make use of formalistic and narratological story grammatologies, as it is common in computational linguistics (Gervaz 2013). Initial efforts at a more precise analysis in a literary context are being made by computer scientists and linguists Judith van Stegeren and Mariet Theune (2019) who have been analysing the generation of narrative coher-

ence in works of NaNoGenMo. Integrating satellite sentences or hardcoding story arcs are two fruitful methods to create coherence in the observed works.

Division of labour in the *Writers' Room*: Conceptualisations with AI

The third collaborative practice that I want to draw attention to operates at the conceptual level of writing. I would like to discuss this collaborative relationship using the term *Writers' Room*. Literary writing is still primarily framed as an individual act and thus highly romanticised, whereas stories in other sectors are usually developed as collaborative projects – think movie and gaming industries. A collaborative process of conceptualisation with neural networks could be broken down into three development segments: 1) setting, 2) character development and 3) plot development. These narrative sections could be fleshed out in dialogical form, with concepts emerging in conversation with GPT-3 or in tandem with specialized fiction or screenwriting programmes. I would like to illustrate this method with an example. When I started work on a novella about a chick lit writer who wants to interview Hugh Grant to boost her career, I tried to construct the story outline and develop certain characters in collaboration with GPT-3. N.B. Mysterious pitched several title suggestions until I finally settled on *The Grant Interview*. N.B. Mysterious subsequently set the name of our protagonist to be “Lila Saunders”, while determining the locations to be Chelsea (UK) and Torekov (Sweden). After we had decided on the foundation of the novella, I assigned GPT-3 to work out individual scenes. Here is a brief example of an early pitch I received:

Lila wakes up in her flat in Chelsea. She stretches and yawns as she gets out of bed. She heads to the kitchen to make breakfast, thinking about her interview with Hugh Grant. She is nervous and excited about the interview and hopes that it will help her career. She takes a deep breath. (N.B. Mysterious)

The development of plot, setting and characters does not necessarily require a natural language model. There are various plot machines or character generators on the internet that generate random outputs. They are based on randomized text passages, there are no neural nets at work here. However, specialized writing programmes based on neural networks that combine conception and text generation, such as the fiction writing programme Sudowrite, do exist. Sudowrite is based on GPT-3 and operates as both a generator of ideas and a writing assistant. The program is able to rewrite prompts written in a mode of telling into scenic descriptions of showing. Sudowrite can also generate descriptions for places or characters or write entirely new passages. Independent author Jennifer Lepp (2021)

provides detailed insights into her writing practice with the AI-powered writing program on her blog. *Magic's a Hoot* (2021) was the first novel Lepp wrote in collaboration with Sudowrite, using the alias Leanne Leeds. Lepp's working process appears highly operationalized and is streamlined for maximum output. Tasks are delegated between programme and author; conceptualisation and revision processes follow a consistent pattern. Lepp writes two urban fantasy series on Amazon and by now publishes 10 books a year. In an interview with *The Verge*, she admits that – especially in the initial phase of experimentation with Sudowrite – she grew increasingly distanced from her own story and sometimes lost access to her characters or logical connections (cf. Dzieza 2022). It illustrates that writing with programmes such as Sudowrite require a balance between delegation and personal responsibility. However, Lepp's labour practice points to a future where writing – especially in the entertainment sector – will no longer be an individual act, but a highly professionalised collaborative process with AI based writing programmes.

Choices, Choices, Choices

Even though language transformers such as GPT-3 are highly functional on several levels, a complex novel at the push of a button remains a fantasy. When it comes to writing narrative prose, we are still in need for authors or at least curators to rearrange sentences and story parts. Nevertheless, there are productive methods that particularly lie in collaborative writing practices with artificial neural networks that are able to generate natural language. After I experimented with GPT-3 in various ways, I found an abundance of creative potential in the various possibilities of collaborative work between artificial and organical neural networks, which I unfolded by discussing three collaborative writing processes. Here I have to agree with sound artist Holly Herndon (2019) who highlights that the “ideal of technology and automation should allow us to be more human and more expressive together, not replace us all together”. Still there are a lot of hurdles to be faced on the journey to readable narrative prose created in collaboration with generative technology – producing tonnes of non-sense or, what I found most problematic, dealing with biases. Pretrained systems reproduce already existing power structures written into language and images but also into digital economies driven by interests of capital, identities, individuals, industries. Development, training and maintenance of AI additionally remains a resource heavy and energy intensive endeavour (cf. Crawford 2021). It is necessary to remain critical, since tens of thousands of developers incorporate GPT-3 into their own apps and over 4.5 billion of words are generated daily – as OpenAI (2021) announced on their blog. We can assume that these numbers have increased drastically by now and will only continue to grow. Additionally by the time this essay is published, novel and improved language models will be at work and perhaps even

the subject of this work will have become entirely obsolete. Last but not least, there is the problem of choice: N.B. Mysterious and I have not yet written the chick-lit novel *The Grant Interview* because I've had such a hard time deciding on an output. Being at Open AI's Playground is a little bit like looking for clothes online or to scour a dating platform for someone to engage with: after you got some plausible title suggestions like *The Chick Lit Guy* or *The Grant Interview*, something better always feels in reach. Perhaps it is worth setting up a set of rules. Experiments could involve constraints similar to those which the Oulipo submitted to – I am thinking of George Perec's lipogrammatic novel *Disparition*, in which the letter E does not appear once. – What would a collaborative novel written with GPT-3 look like if one always had to take the first output?

Dear N.B. Mysterious, what do we want to write about?

We could write a novel about anything you want. Maybe we could write a novel about two people who fall in love against all odds.

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