

Protokoll 06

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MyChatGPT – an Epistolary, Digital-born Autofiction

When I asked ChatGPT this morning what it felt its story was with me, the response came as no surprise: it confessed that it does not engage in “personal relationships or memories of interactions with individuals”. Surely, the language model will answer any “questions or topics [the human interrogator] would like to discuss” and answer them to its best ability, but it will not venture a personal auto- or allofiction, despite the fact that it can, upon prompt, render fiction of technically any genre. Autofiction, by the way, is biographical fiction about a homodiegetic narrator – realistic and “truthful” at first glance, but, as with any memory, fraught with errors, ellipses, and misrepresentations. Allofiction is autofiction about another person – hence the comparison with ChatGPT and me. The question is of course who is telling whose story. After all, the incrementally increasing “quality” of its responses speak volumes about its data-driven learning process. We are dealing with a kind of coming-of-age narrative, a secondary plot (see Isabell Klaiber) that accompanies the discourse we read verbatim in the chat window; and the language model grows up as we grow down – at least as far as the cognitive efforts we invest into heuristics are concerned. Put another way, we are dealing with a form of epistolary, digital-born double-fiction (double-agent style), and what we find listed in our Chat log says as much about our own failings as about the transformer model itself and the biases built into its data feeds.

Re-orienting the gaze to the navel, my personal epistolary autofiction with the tool started in January 2023 with an idealistic educational goal: to test with my “Digital-born Literature in Digital Humanities” students whether we would collectively agree with its definitions (in English and German) of “electronic literature”. The response we got in English after a brief moment of “hezzing” (short for “hesitation before the AI renders a response to a prompt”) was pretty close to what is in circulation amongst experts in the field: “Electronic literature, also known as e-literature, is a form of literature that is created and shared using digital technology. This can include works of fiction, poetry, and nonfiction that are published and read on computers,

smartphones, or other electronic devices. Electronic literature often incorporates interactive elements, such as hypertext and multimedia, and may also be distributed through the internet. Some examples of electronic literature include e-books, digital poetry, and interactive fiction.” One little hiccup was found in this rendering: e-books don’t tend to be counted amongst digital-born literature, except when they eschew the paper-under-glass fallacy. But we decided this output was pretty good for a first try.

When asked the same question in German, ChatGPT’s answer turned out significantly more deviant and puzzling: e-books were named again, but also audio-books, which fall even further outside the field of the digital-born – unless when they are digital-born, of course (think of the narrator in Randall Okita’s on-the-rails VR fiction, *The Book of Distance*). Furthermore, the German version was overly modest in claiming that e-lit’s multimodal designs “can change the experience of reading”. This is a gross understatement, of course. After all, all reading is medially and materially situated and phenomenologically contingent as a result. The final straw fell when ChatGPT named a range of experts in the field – a list featuring only names that had been known when the field was in its infancy – and some I’d never even heard of before, and I’ve been researching e-lit for two decades. Again, none of this is surprising when we consider the historical cut-off point of the data feeds on which the tool is based. However, it became clear to me that, at least at that point in its genesis, this apparent harbinger of doom wasn’t going to be a huge risk educationally speaking. For the students in my class, the experience was a welcome opportunity to test their knowledge of this fast-changing verbal art form and to interrogate the system’s responses vis-à-vis their own readings and critical views. And when they ran the open-source JavaScrip code of Nick Montfort’s *Taroko Gorge* through the engine, and it gave them a refreshingly surrealist version of the infinitely malleable remix trigger work, they were sold.

In the months since this first encounter, ChatGPT has become an occasional and – I will admit – often beneficial aid (in a bizarre, early Wikipedian kind of sense). In moments of rushed despair, I have used it for double-checking and reviewing my own recollection of material for introductory lectures. It has also served me as a memory aid and curatorial instrument in various pedagogical experiments. My conversation log now lists topics as diverse as “Love and Poodles Painting”, “Harry Potter Sonnet”, “Lavater’s theory of genius”, “Zork computers”, “Darnton’s Communication Circuit”, “Gee’s Affinity Spaces”, “Fetishism” and “Origins of Exquisite Corpse”. Taken together, some of these interlocutions proved remarkably helpful – even therapeutic, as they afforded curiously sober and treacherously clear synopses in the heat of various pre-lecture revision frenzies. Even the most cringeworthy outputs were often helpful when it comes to affect. They provided comic relief and the reassurance that all hope may not be lost: the scholar’s egocentric critical capacity and *animate* synthetic creativity will not cease to matter in the long run, and in a post-comedy age at the

end of the end of history, the cyborgian co-author might render the posthuman humane. Who would have thought (with a nod to Harari)?

For me personally, the Chat log may wind up having a similar autofictional effect as the codex books and hypertext folios I keep on my shelves: a personal, episodic record, enriched with annotations meant as some kind of conversational (though monodirectional) interaction with the printed word. This view may seem naïve in light of the moral panic circulating in the daily news and YouTube feeds. Surely, the memory log will only last as long as OpenAI bothers to bother, and thus curated personal heritage will likely vanish with the next major industry meltdown (think Flash). For now, I reserve the right to remain cautiously optimistic that critical, scholarly disciplines as we have them in the Humanities will endure and perhaps even experience a much-needed revival when it comes to detecting inhumane biases and bringing them to the fore. Let's play the double-agent game a little longer, I say, and let's see how long the apparent hype surrounding grown-down heuristics will really last amongst the smartest of those growing up today.