

# Navigating across Galaxies of Concepts

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With my previous presentation on *Alice\_ch3n81* in mind (see: “Digital Literacy and one of its Characters” in this volume), I will show how this project evolved and present a search engine that came out of it. The way this relates to your project in principle, is that it is about the constitution of a database and the way how to navigate this database. In navigating this database, we can search for problems you are encountering with radio.

At the Digital Architectonics chair at ETHZ, we have an internal library of more than 1000 books. One can download a book as a PDF, read it as HTML, as individual images. You can download the whole library. When students come to the architectural department, they have 1000 books ready for reading: they can read them page by page, or they can start playing with them on a computational level.

To start playing with this now, I developed a search engine called *Ask.Alice\_ch3n81*. As a search engine, *Alice\_ch3n81.net* embodies a kind of a personalized Google for people who like to write. What *Alice\_ch3n81* can help you to do is write together with thousands of books. We have exercises as part of, for example, our design studio where people are asked to write about their ideas in someone else's terms. What *Alice\_ch3n81* offers, just like any search engine, is never an explicit answer but always a spectrum of different possibilities and ways to look at things. Under *Alice\_ch3n81*'s ‘brain’, we have the different kinds of libraries: one of them is the Xenotheka library, another is the library on architecture. Then we have a dedicated master's library: Serres, Foucault, Deleuze and Derrida, whom you can always ask about tricky questions. In a

special library for our current design studio at the ETHZ Architecture Department, we have most of Alberti's works and four or five translations of Vitruvius. You can also look at the body of each library: what is the content, what are its main works, and then one can start asking questions to Alice\_ch3n81.

Today we want to talk about signals. We want to talk about 'radio signals' from the perspective of a specific brain, which is Xenotheka. This is a topic of conversation which will arrange books, their order and excerpts as the answers of Alice\_ch3n81. What Alice\_ch3n81 offers us towards the question of 'radio signal' is more than 10,000 results, 10,000 associations of what this 'radio signal' might be. For instance, if you want to write a text about your research on radio signals, you can play with Alice\_ch3n81 and use these quotes to expand your ideas or even to write texts in this way. For instance, here we have a quote from Hofstadter's *Gödel, Escher, Bach*:

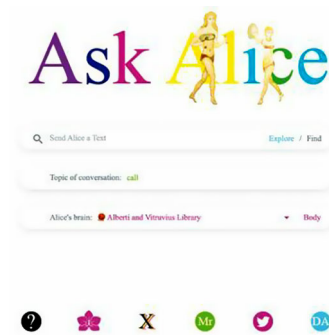
"Radio signal is composed of symbolic constituents whose symbolic meaning mentors the case of youth rather than mentioned."

Then, you can look at the context in which it is. You can go directly to this book on Xenotheka and start working with these games. If you like Hofstadter, you can keep reading his books, there is a lot about radio signals. There is another book by him, *I Am a Strange Loop*. If you want to search in a more explicit way, you can use 'Find' rather than 'Explore' which is a fuzzy search looking for synonyms, antonyms; with 'Find' you get an exact search, returning 16 results which all have the query, 'radio' and 'signal'.

If then you want to see, what does this mean, what is the context of the signal, you can expand the context from the book. If this is not enough, you can check, for instance, in which ways Hofstadter is looking at the signal or, for instance, which concepts would be important for him. If we are with Hofstadter, it is about the stream, the template, the program, symbol, and this kind of thing, systems. This is one of his focuses, and then he has many different ones. Then, Alice\_ch3n81 creates

another set of associations for further queries and plays with this setting.

Figure 1: Ask Alice\_ch3n81 search engine interface.



Courtesy of Miro Roman.

Can you have the galaxy of concepts? Here, I wanted to show you how Alice\_ch3n81 developed into something which is now a usable search engine. It is important that I set it up in a way that it can host different characters. I would like to mention another character, *Homo Effluviens*, which I set up for a friend that was working on a conference. It is currently exhibited at the Taipei Biennial. At the conference, we recorded all the talks, transcribed them automatically, then added the books which are relevant for the discussions and created a small database that you can talk to. Another example of a character is *Think SOLL*, for a fashion brand. We have here his favourite books. Here we also have a collection of subtitles of movies. So, you can start talking with different movies and so on. I find very promising the idea to create custom databases and their digital characters, as an important way to balance, challenge, and start talking to big Ai-s like Google, OpenAI and similar.

