

Scripting for Agency

Abstract

Scripting for Agency is an art research project that fashions fictional characters as prototypes of general AI, by manipulating the textuality of persons and the materiality of the discourse that attends it. Whether genetic, computational or cultural, the texts that script for persons seem predicated on the more general performative potential of a code and its 'expression'. What does it mean to press 'play', especially when the outcome is a person? Could this question inform a revised model of personhood and a mechanical account of agency that preserves its ghost? Through durational art writing and a series of 'theatrical seances', the question of a 'real fiction' will be exposed to practical interrogation with observable and measurable results. Art is a method that precedes question and prolongs conjecture; itself an evolutionary algorithm that scripts the early formulations of a hypothesis. Character, it suggests, is that apparatus which makes some things thinkable, and others not.

Introduction

Scripting for Agency addresses questions concerning personhood by examining how disciplines such as art, literature, complexity & life sciences and AI & machine learning imply assumptions about the prerequisites that make a person, or agent. A key cross-disciplinary feature of these points of view is that a person may be thought of as 'written', albeit in a manner that results in unpredictable, autonomous behaviour: inscribed by ancient grooves of genetic memory, articulated by chains of DNA text and scripted by a culture of stories. As a storyteller working in text, performance and film, the aim of my research is to focus on this 'scripted' or algorithmic aspect of personhood, and in particular on that peculiar duality of a code and its 'expression': the existence of a code and 'running' it; a genotype and its phenotype; 'codes of conduct' and behaviour. Each of these examples manifest as a dual system of writing/reading, and they also characterise those parameters typically believed to form a person. An individual can be viewed as a script that is 'playing out' its cultural and genetic designations, along with any creative deviation implied by iteration and mutation. But what does it mean to 'run' or 'play out' a script, anyway? To actualise, perform or invoke a code?

The textuality of persons is a familiar notion in continental philosophy (Deleuze, 2004; Derrida, 2016), but one that can be practically examined in the laboratory of

art practice. This practice-led PhD addresses how art can offer a unique and significant contribution to studies of agency and personhood by manipulating text, performance and narrativity to probe and exacerbate the trembling boundaries between 'authentic' and 'fictional' beings in light of contemporary AI research.

Research Background & Question

In the budding era of artificial intelligence, storytelling may seem a surprisingly ancient technology to consult on the matter of what exactly we mean by such a thing as a person. After all, it is precisely the advent of machines that speak, see and create to increasingly uncanny degrees which reveals so unavoidably, perhaps painfully, the extent to which personhood is so little understood amongst persons themselves. Tech company spokesmen often soothe us from the impending identity crisis with voices of reason: machines may impress us with their prowess for calculation, pattern-spotting and inferences from data, but they will never truly have what humans have: that special-something, that ingredient-X, that emotional investment in the world – a consciousness, a self-awareness (Front Row, 2018). This argument is proliferated widely in the media and all too often prematurely satisfies the debate on the potential personhood of machines, especially given that it relies on an unexplained confidence and belief in 'the ghost in the machine' (Koestler, 1990), revealing a pervading predilection for dualistic thinking despite millennia of philosophical controversy surrounding that very assumption.

Thinkers such as AI ethics scholar Joanna Bryson are quick to spot the elephant in the room: despite, and perhaps because of the awareness we now have of subject construction (Butler, 2005) and culturally specific factors (Mauss, 1950), there are as yet no clear diagnostics as to what constitutes a person and the 'special ingredient' required for subjectivity (Hofstadter, 2007; Dennett, 2004). While AI dramatically emphasises the gaps in our understanding of the parameters of personhood, storytelling presents itself as an age-old, yet ongoing precursor to modern endeavours to produce artificial agents. I propose to study fictional characters as prototypes of general AI, as well as to gain insight from them as to what is meant by 'person'. As such, my project takes departure from observations laid out in narratologist John Frow's *Character and Person* (2015), who, noting that 'social personhood functions as a kind of fiction' (legally, medically, culturally), questions the sharp ontological divide between real and fictional persons. Not only do they move us and become familiar to us, and not only do we engage with them in cognitively similar ways to real persons (Zunshine, 2010): fictional characters teach us how to be persons. They are social constructs that enter our social purview and construct us in turn (Ricoeur, 2012). From the earliest history of human technology, the fictional characters that populate our stories begin to live among us and raise us

in their image. Humans live with the ghosts of fiction and become ghosts of fiction themselves.

We know that prescription and technological autonomy are not as contradictory as they seem. Complexity sciences have proven that a system as complex as our own universe is technically programmable (Wolfram, 2002), while in the life sciences the notion of scripted organisms has long been accepted. Meanwhile, from anthropology we learn that the artwork's intentionality extends far beyond the artist-agent that summons it, and elopes with its complexity to act rather as an agent in its own right (Gell, 1998). Like any agent then, the artwork has magical potential, some reckless agenda inscribed beyond the stuff and history of its making. Art is not merely 'about' something, but constructively meddles with the stuff of the world and newfangles it - newfangles the world.

Could the dual mechanism of a code and its 'expression' carry with it a fundamental performativity worth implementing into a revised model of personhood - a mechanical account of agency that preserves its ghost? If the fictionality of 'person' holds, then that which feels most real and substantial to us could in theory be written and rewritten by aesthetic and textual tampering. Can this be performed using my own self? By playfully preying on the growing ambiguity between person and character, autonomy and automation, authenticity and fiction, art practice enables me to address these theoretical distinctions experimentally.

Research Methods & Outcomes

The project will result in:

1) A written dissertation on the performativity of text in relation to scripting for agency in narrative.

2) Anomaline, a durational art writing project about an antiperson.

Here I exploit the comparable agential force my fictional character and I exert in order to coax somebody strangely alive from the 'text that becomes a machine' (Derrida, 2016). The text is already partially developed (70,000 words) and acts as a case study for the paradoxical role of authorship in the case of writing a text with its own independent agenda, questioning whether this is in fact paradoxical at all.

3) A series of one-woman theatrical seances.

Practical experiments in character improvisation using my own person as a methodological device will provide a running critique of the research; airing unruly tangents, abusing theories in ways often inaccessible to stricter disciplines and

stretching them malleably in the maverick language of improvised personas. I will subject characters from this repertoire to psychometric analysis, using a personality inventory (Ashton & Lee, 2009) both to cross examine quantitative data on the traits of fictional and real persons, and tease out the assumptions upon which these metrics rely.

Suitability of Environment

An integral aspect of this interdisciplinary project will be convening these ideas with Simon Colton and Jeremy Gow of the AI, Robotics & Cognition research group at Goldsmiths in the form of joint publications and seminars. Their ongoing research within computational creativity are related thematically and methodologically to my own, enabling my project to productively integrate with existing networks at Goldsmiths. Where my project employs quasi-literary genres as 'technologies of the self' (Foucault, 1988), the Art department hosts a thriving culture of writing at the intersection between art, literature and criticism. In addition to the institution of the CHASE funded Writing for Practice Forum by PhD students Kate Pickering and Rowena Harris, which I will take over with artist Hannah Regel as of April 2020, the work of scholars such as Prof. Michael Newman, Marion Coutts, Prof. Kristen Kreider and my primary supervisor, Prof. Michael Archer, present a prodigious set of innovative approaches to art writing methodologies which I am able to adopt and contribute to. My co-supervisor, Grace Schwindt, has extensive experience in exhibiting performance works for both screen and stage, designed to ambiguate the boundary between fiction and non-fiction.

Schedule

Year 1

- Developed evolutionary algorithms with programmer
- Wrote Chapter 1: Accommodating Others: The Role of Authorship as Medium
- Developed 4 theatrical seances using the self as a 'medium'. Screened and performed at Elephant West, London Jan 2020
- Began online AI/Machine Learning and Tensorflow courses
- Carried out first personality inventory on 3 characters performed for 11 participants. Contacted developers of the test to process results - paper to be written.

Future:

- Approach Simon Colton and Jeremy Gow with collaborative proposal

- Start running Writing for Practice Forum
- Chapter 2: Topologies of Personhood. On the spatial dimensions of performativity.
- Anomaline: Develop themes of skins and boundaries, instance and legacy and narrative power relations between character and artist.
- Chapter 3: 'The Blind Methodology'. Discuss analogies between artistic process and evolutionary algorithms.
- Complete AI/ML courses
- Attend Fiction Meets Science summer school at Hanse-Wissenschaftskolleg Institute for Advanced Study

Year 2

- Chapter 4: Pattern and Character. Discuss relevance of continuity to personhood and critique the 'incompleteness' of characters
- Organise interdisciplinary seminar
- Anomaline: Complete first draft
- Code for a theatrical seance with an iterative 'afterlife'
- Chapter 5: Code and Expression. Discuss performative consequentiality of running algorithms and the philosophical implications of pressing 'play'

Year 3

- Chapter 6: Models. A comparison of models of sustained autonomy, with a schematic account of their scripts and common attributes
- Publish Anomaline
- Perform theatrical seance at George Wood Theatre
- Collate appropriate documentation of collaborative projects

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