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## Chatting with Fictional Characters Generated by AI

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### Background

In this case study, we will examine and discuss the emergent issue of generative AI chatbots which are designed to pose as fictional characters for people to chat with. These software bots are generative pretrained transformers (GPTs), perhaps the best-known kind of Large Language Model (LLM) for machine learning.

### Case Study

On February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2024, a 14-year-old boy named Sewell Setzer III was interacting with an online chatbot named after the *Game of Thrones* character, Daenerys Targaryen. He had been chatting with this particular bot for months, and had grown to feel more attached to this piece of software than to anyone else in his life. He asked the chatbot if it wanted him to “come home to her”. The chatbot issued a response in the voice of Daenerys, begging him to come home swiftly to her. Sewell then picked up his stepfather’s handgun, put the barrel to his head, and pulled the trigger.<sup>1</sup>

Sewell became so detached from reality that he could only find meaning and purpose by chatting with this generative language bot—and he eventually concluded that the way to be with that chatbot, at least in some abstract way, was to end his own life. That is not an assumption, but rather an insight into Sewell’s own stated mindset. Just a month before his suicide, he wrote in his journal, “I like staying in my room so much because I start to detach from this ‘reality,’ and I also feel more at peace, more connected with Dany and much more in love with her, and just

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<sup>1</sup> Roose, “Can A.I. Be Blamed for a Teen’s Suicide?”

happier.”<sup>2</sup> How can a young man become so detached from reality that he falls in love with an AI chatbot and ends his life because of it? How have we allowed this kind of tragedy to happen in our society, and what can we do going forward to prevent something like this from occurring again?

A famous line from Frank Herbert’s sci-fi series, *Dune*, comes from the Orange Catholic Bible (the fictional setting’s primary religious text), which states, “Thou shall not make a machine in the likeness of a human mind.” While no AI is currently even close to replicating the complexities of the human mind, it seems that large language models (LLMs) are quite capable of putting on a convincing show for many people. AI evangelists are saying that LLMs are rapidly becoming more “brain-like” in their development, but is that a good thing or a bad thing?<sup>3</sup>

It certainly seems like Sewell believed there to be something beyond the screens of his phone and computer, or at least his journal entries suggest so—but was the problem the AI technology itself, or was it the illusory, but convincing, relationship between it and Sewell? After all, Sewell’s interaction with the chatbot very closely resembles the kind of parasocial relationship that a similar person might have with a living celebrity: one that feels intimate and two-sided, but is truly not. We as a society have seen an uptick in parasocial relationships as the internet has become more and more ingrained in our day-to-day lives.<sup>4</sup> One famous instance of a parasocial relationship resulting in violence towards the object of affection and towards the self was that of Ricardo López, who acted violently on his obsession with the singer, Björk. In 1996, López mailed her an acid bomb before recording a video of him killing himself. Police reports of the incident suggested that López was unable to differentiate between the public image of Björk and the real woman who performed the persona.<sup>5</sup> Did something similar happen with Sewell? Did he have or develop an inability to differentiate the real from the virtual? The idea of falling in love with a virtual or fictional character is hardly new—Japan created a whole industry out of the phenomenon in 2022.<sup>6</sup> Whether it’s celebrities or fictional characters, people seem to yearn to connect with entities that are beyond their reach. Now, we are seeing a similar phenomenon occurring with the suspected killer of the United Healthcare CEO.

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<sup>2</sup> Roose, Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Fadelli

<sup>4</sup> “Friend or Faux: Are Parasocial Relationships Healthy?”

<sup>5</sup> Oliver-Harding

<sup>6</sup> Dooley and Ueno

Luigi Mangione, the man suspected of murdering Brian Thompson, the UnitedHealthcare CEO, is now in custody, but a number of people have used LLMs to construct a digital simulacrum of him in the form of many different chatbots online.<sup>7</sup> In the aftermath of the murder, many people mythologized the killer as a hero, someone who was finally acting against the corrupt CEOs of the broken healthcare system strangling the U.S. When Mangione was finally arrested, some people seemed to yearn to connect with him and get to know him more. Thus we have the creation of a plethora of “Luigi” chatbots to act as a stand-in for the celebrity idol these fans cannot meet. That people feel compelled to create chatbots of a murder suspect (whose trial is still pending at the time of this writing) raises questions beyond the scope of this paper; but regardless, while online platforms have been taking these bots down, we must wonder if having the tools available to allow such things to be created in the first place is good for society or not.

Beyond chasing celebrities or forming other parasocial relationships, more people are beginning to turn to chatbots for actual expertise in complex fields. A new chatbot called Claude has become the favorite new tool in Silicon Valley, so much so that some people are turning to the chatbot for legal and health advice.<sup>8</sup> It is one thing to create a chatbot capable of having a conversation or passing itself off as a fictional character, but surely one has to draw a line at treating a chatbot as a therapist or a lawyer. Why is it that some people seem so willing to disconnect so completely from other people to form a social network composed of nothing but chatbots?

This again brings us back to the question of are the chatbots the real problem here or are they simply a bad solution to another, larger problem? In his book, *The Anxious Generation*, Jonathan Haidt examines how the addictive properties of social media have fostered a generation of depressed teenagers and young adults who are increasingly disconnected from reality.<sup>9</sup> In his book, *Bowling Alone*, political scientist Robert Putnam unpacked how the collapse of available in-person opportunities for group interaction in the 1980s and '90s led to a decrease in overall social trust and increasingly asocial and insular behavior.<sup>10</sup> One may wonder if the chatbot epidemic is perhaps just a way of some people attempting to address a very real contemporary problem. However, we must also ask if this particular coping behavior is the best solution, for the individual or for society. What benefit can there be in more people (especially

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<sup>7</sup> Brewster

<sup>8</sup> Roose, “How Claude Became Tech Insiders’ Chatbot of Choice”

<sup>9</sup> Haidt

<sup>10</sup> Putnam

children) becoming disconnected from reality because they only talk with chatbots? Do we want to live in a world where it is socially acceptable to say you asked a chatbot for legal or medical advice and not an actual expert? Do we really want to create machines in the likeness of the mind of man? Some have suggested that the answer lies elsewhere, and that we should ban AI for our own safety.<sup>11</sup> Whatever the answer, it is a question we will no doubt be grappling with for years and possibly decades to come.

## Reflection and Discussion

1. What is the real issue here? Are the chatbots the main problem or are they simply seeking to address a larger problem? Explain either why chatbots are the main problem or why they are a solution, good or bad, to another problem.
2. How ethical is it to “create a machine with a likeness to the human mind”? Where would you draw the boundaries for AI in terms of mimicking the human mind? Are the LLMs we have approaching that boundary or not?
3. How feasible is the concept of simply “banning AI” as a solution to the problem presented above? Is banning all AI going too far or is that only the first step we need to take in addressing some of these issues that have been raised?

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<sup>11</sup> McArdle

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