

When a Dialog becomes a Monologue: A debate on custom-made literature with generative AI

Maja T. Jerrentrup

Landshut University
Faculty of Interdisciplinary Studies
maja-tabea.jerrentrup@
haw-landshut.de

Martín Villalba

University of Cologne
Department of German Language and
Literature I – Linguistics
mvillal1@uni-koeln.de

Abstract

This paper presents a discussion on the potential effects of AI-generated fiction on its users in contrast to traditional literature. After discussing the importance of reading fiction and introducing the technical aspects of long story generation, we look at four aspects of how AI-generated fiction can affect users and society, namely, democratic use, creativity, customization and connectedness. We close with a discussion focusing on the needs for media education.

1 Introduction

This interdisciplinary paper is based on a discussion between a computer linguist and a cultural anthropologist, both with a strong academic and practical interest in art. The discussion evolves around the effects fictional books written by Artificial Intelligence (AI) via text prompts can have on the users, i.e. the people prompting the fiction first and foremost to read it themselves.

Recent technological advances have refocused discussions on the possible impact of technology (e.g. Frey and Osborne, 2017; Nishant et al., 2020) to its real effects on varied segments of society such as teachers and students (Barnum and Seetharaman, 2025), creatives (Ilonka Gero et al., 2024), and technical users (Lee et al., 2025). Whether or in how far AI-generated fiction can be considered art (Jerrentrup, 2024) – a barrier that even “traditional” books may have trouble clearing — or whether its contents are appropriate are not the subject of this article. We focus instead on an overlooked area of study: the impact of AI-generated fiction on the side of the prompter, that is, the “user”, and particularly in what it means for them to generate their own book with the intention to read it themselves as opposed to reading a book from a conventional author. We define “user” as a human reader who willingly generates a work of fiction for their own consumption and present a human-centered framework on how to analyze the impact of AI.

2 How we got here

The intersection of reading fiction and AI is the result of two massively-popular phenomena crashing against each other: reading is both a popular hobby and a key component of modern society (Section 2.1) while generative AI has revolutionized the ways in which we create novel texts (Section 2.2).

It is impossible to assess how many works of fiction are created to be consumed by their creators alone, but most indicators point towards an explosion in the number of written works created with AI across all forums. An overwhelming number of AI submissions initially focused on literary markets like Amazon and Sci-Fi magazine *Clarkesworld* (Kan, 2023; Clarke, 2023), but today even non-commercial forums like the fanfiction repository Archive of Our Own (AO3) are experiencing an exponential rise in the number of AI-generated submissions (see Figure 1). The real numbers, both public and private, are likely to be much higher than reported (Brenneis, 2025).

2.1 Reading fiction

Reading fiction is among the most popular hobbies, e.g. in Spain, 58% females and 39% males consider reading as one of their main pastimes, followed by similar numbers from Italy, Germany, Mexico and the US (Fleck, 2024). More fundamentally, Worth (2017) argued that “what we gain from engaging with the arts, and with narrative in particular, is a certain way of making sense of the world”. “When we read a literary text”, Kivy and Meskin (2019) argue, “we enter a relationship with its creator that is closely analogous to a conversation”.

Arsilan et al. (2022) have shown that reading can lead to an improvement of positive emotions and a reduction of negative ones. Bibliotherapy has been successfully employed for the treatment of patients with symptoms of depression or anxiety (Peterkin and Grewal, 2018). Fiction allows the

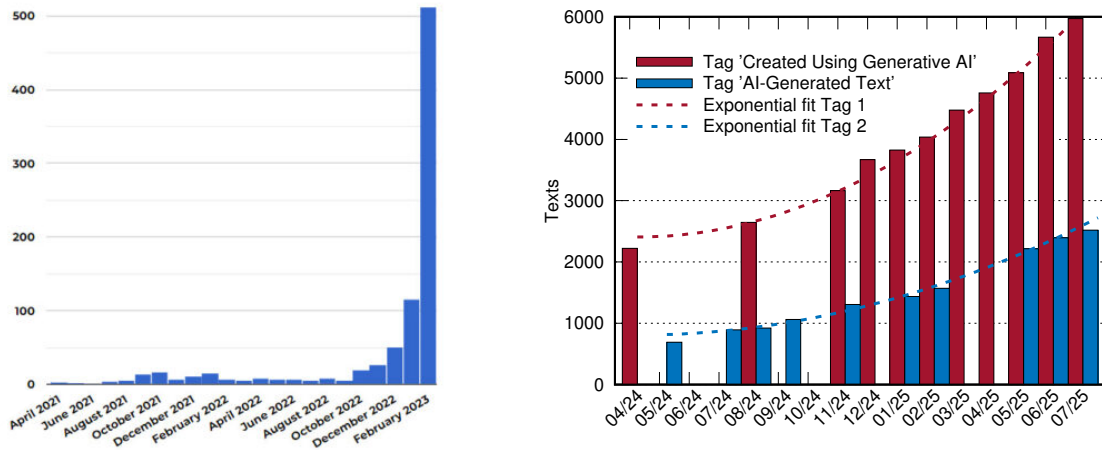


Figure 1: Left: Number of AI-generated submissions to *Clarkesworld Magazine* between April 2021 and February 2023. Right: AO3 submissions publicly-tagged as AI-generated since April 2024 with curves showing an exponential curve fit (Clarke, 2023; Organization for Transformative Works, 2024–2025).

development of the own character in a way beneficial for the individual and society: “by reading and making connections with a story’s characters and their challenges, students start to perceive their own actions differently” (Roza and Guimarães, 2022). It also increases people’s willingness to help while still keeping their own identity (Parsons, 2013), improves their ability to express emotional states, and decreases discriminatory behavior (Lysaker and Sedberry, 2015).

Fiction also enables a safe space for confrontations with difficult topics. Research on why people enjoy a sad film shows that recipients benefit from confronting themselves with the inevitable terror life brings from a safe distance and in a controlled way (Smuts, 2007). Confronting something sad makes the recipient sad as well, but knowing this, they feel good about being an empathic person (Feagin, 1983) and feel connected towards others who all feel the same emotion, in line with South Asian *rasa* theory (Barlingay, 2007). Reading fiction is therefore not only a popular pastime, but also exerts positive effects on the individual and – through more social behavior — on society as a whole.

2.2 Technical foundations

In its early days, story generation systems offered limited control over the direction a story would take. Klein et al. (1979) generated stories as the result of a random simulation but its successor TALESPIN (Meehan, 1977) used an opinionated planning strategy that accounted for relationships and personalities guiding the system towards a specific

narrative goal (Schank and Abelson, 1977). Dehn (1981) further included the satisfaction of the author’s intentions as another constraint. Interactive systems would bring the author’s intention to the front. Goldfarb-Tarrant et al. (2019) introduced a multi-module neural system where the user is actively involved in planning, editing, and revising a story generated in collaboration with the system.

Recent advances in NLP introduced the “pre-train, prompt, and predict” paradigm for story generation (Liu et al., 2023) where a user guides the text generated by a Language Model (LM) by crafting natural language prompts instructing the model to follow a specific story structure, adopt a specific persona, or follow the conventions of a certain genre. Developers of LMs optimize their models to be maximally steerable for multiple use cases (Llama Team, AI @ Meta, 2024) allowing users to generate all kinds of stories using only natural language, exchanging control over the final result for ease of use. Modern hybrid approaches such as Re³ (Yang et al., 2022) keep the planning and generation steps separate, prompting first a general-purpose LM to build a structured overarching plan and then incrementally generating story paragraphs via focused LM prompts that include both the plan and the previous story. DOC (Yang et al., 2023) extends this architecture and achieves higher coherence by generating more detailed intermediate outlines and adding a controller module that keeps the generation faithful to the outline. While both systems allow for user interaction at all levels, users are encouraged to focus on the higher-level plan-

ning stages only.

3 Analysis

Our discussion focuses on four specific dynamics of reading and authoring fictional works of literature with AI, centering on works created for the individuals themselves¹: Democratic use, Creativity, Customization and Connectedness.

3.1 Democratic use

AI is allowing more and more people to generate works, actively and effortlessly designing their own fiction, entertainment, and education. Its democratizing potential can't be understated.

But there is no shortage of fiction. A quick calculation puts the number of fiction books published worldwide in 2022 at 220k but and there's only so much a person can read (Chesterman, 2024). Self-made literature could keep us from reading an established canon constantly undergoing changes and re-readings (McLeod, 2013). Books addressing contemporary topics could potentially become future classics, making it conceivable for AI-created fiction to reduce the impact of valuable literature.

When advocating for a democratic use, the question of democracy itself is on display. Three major forces have collectively bind together successful democracies: "social capital (extensive social networks with high levels of trust), strong institutions, and shared stories" (Haidt, 2022) – all of which have been weakened by the impact of digital and, in particular, social media. If individually-prompted-and-consumed literature further weakens those "shared stories", that's not favorable for democracy as a whole. But if we talk about a "democratizing potential" we need to address criticism that democracy itself, including the paradox of tolerance (Pasamonk, 2004), may be an unstable form of governing, dating back to Plato's critique of (Athenian) democracy that "democracies are more likely to follow their citizens' impulses and desires, rather than any concern for the common good" (Kofmel, 2008). The increase in fake news and populism disputes whether "democratization" (as it is) should be seen as comprehensively positive, asking instead whether the individual desire of reading a book about a certain topic should also allow for topics that are more generally important. When dealing with desires that are destructive

¹Note that sharing the work cannot be extricated from the process – a person that prompts a piece of fiction they enjoy may want to show it to their peers or even a broader audience.

to society as a whole we must ask whether AI-generated books should avoid topics like terrorism, pedophilia, and racism even when the exclusion of such topics limits creativity and introduces a kind of censorship usually put forward by some elites.

3.2 Creativity

Creativity has traditionally been defined as a problem-solving ability, as ideas are only creative when they are put into being (Krause, 1972); It is further connected to development and empowerment (Mundt, 2009) and leads to "pride, self-esteem and thus mental health" (Schuster, 2015).

With AI, everyone gets the chance to call themselves a creator (Jerrentrup, 2024). However, it is neither clear whether we are actually talking about creativity, nor whether users feel like authors after generating a book with AI. Research on the perception of AI-generated art shows that people are less inclined to assume that AIs can have "artistic intentions" (Ambrosio, 2019; Mikalonytė and Kneer, 2022). "We often assume that feeling the 'mind behind' an artwork (...) is a crucial ingredient of our aesthetic appreciation" (Manovich and Arielli, 2024). Doshi and Hauser (2024) and Zhikai et al. (2024) further argue that AI-generated fiction, while technically better written, is less novel, more similar to other works, and less creative.

Alignment, biases, and censorship present a further complication. Popular AI software restricts terms or expressions considered potentially harmful, with image-generating AI excluding terms related to pornography, nudity or violence but also words like "transparent" or "knife". While these restrictions are intended to protect vulnerable users, they also limit agency and creativity by excluding ideas and reinforcing social biases – "A literary world where no character is ever mean is unlikely to be a very interesting one" (Ippolito et al., 2022).

It is impossible to draw a clear line: "Lolita" by Vladimir Nabokov is considered world literature but is ultimately about a middle-aged man taking advantage of a young girl, with scholars urging readers "to reconsider the text from the perspective of Lolita, as a child incest victim" (Meek, 2017). "The sorrows of young Werther" by Johann Wolfgang Goethe (1787) turned the young writer into an overnight celebrity while also leading to copycat suicides and book bans. One could argue that well-known works of fiction conveying "evil" content are often widely contextualized, discussed, and crit-

icized, and thus “channeled” for the public, which is not possible with individually-created works.

Defining “evil”, be it thoughts or deeds, is just as hard. The barrier between good and evil is permeable and nebulous (Zimbardo, 2008). If it is this hard to distinguish the evil from the good, especially as the evil bears cultural connections and an artistic fascination (Jerrentrup, 2022), it seems impossible to censor works by banning prompts. As already suggested by Aristotle, the occupation with the evil in fiction can provide catharsis and prevent people from actually acting evil (Cain, 2005).

Several institutions opt to put safeguards in place keeping vulnerable populations from accessing harmful content while still providing means to bypass them if someone so desires: the US Supreme Court rejected “kiddie-proofing” the internet as it would “reduce the adult population to only what is fit for children” (Keller, 1999); and libraries regularly reclassify works under more appropriate categories (Kohn and McKinnon, 2024).

3.3 Customization

AI enables countless options to customize products and make them more meaningful to their users: “if it is the narrative that we respond to, and the narratives are getting better or at least more vivid through technological developments, then it would make sense that we have increasingly stronger affective responses” (Worth, 2004) to fiction.

Customization also allows the user to keep the story from taking an unwanted turn. This is particularly relevant for the prevention of triggers and repressed topics such as racism, violence, or death, but also more subtle topics such as the birth of a child for a reader with an unfulfilled desire to have children. This could be seen as the defensive inhibition of the painful known as “repression”, described by Freud as the “corner-stone on which the whole structure of psychoanalysis rests” (Freud, 1915–1957; Bryne et al., 1963).

Ytre-Arne and Moe (2021) argue that people manage their emotional well-being by deciding when and how to occupy themselves with (individually) stressful topics. We then speak not only of *repression* (a subconscious defense mechanism) but also of *suppression*, a coping strategy that’s flexible, adaptive, and associated with greater resilience and better mental health (Oh et al., 2019).

Users could use custom works to gradually occupy themselves with difficult topics according to

their own assessment of their needs. Custom fiction could not only enable the reading of more fulfilling and meaningful works but also carry therapeutic potential, as in the gradual exposure used in behavioral therapy. AI could empower a user with arachnophobia to confront their fear with stories introducing friendly spiders at first and, gradually, a larger number of them.

But all these benefits depend on the user, their motivation, and their engagement with the creative process — A user that prompts an AI to just “tell a story” without engaging in its creation would most likely not benefit from this exercise.

3.4 Connectedness

With AI, one can have one’s own book, based on individual wishes. Any reader can create personas they can identify with and establish a parasocial relationship “mediated by the personal relevance of the story” (Liebers and Schramm, 2017). AI-generated fiction can be more meaningful to its reader and make them feel more connected.

These personas, however, may not help to broaden the user’s horizon and become more empathic to others. Similarly to algorithms on social media etc., this may create filter bubbles (Pariser, 2011). The user would not get to know new perspectives and would not be challenged, seeing merely a boring reflection of themselves which creates a false sense of connectedness. On the other hand, a critical confrontation with oneself may be more likely if AI-generated fiction is written in a way that encourages new perspectives and/or if the user is already open to them, e.g. during psychotherapy. Checking these assumptions is a topic of active research.

On the topic of sharing fiction with peers, making art could switch from “I share my opinion with the world” to “I’m making art for me and me alone”. While perhaps not as extreme as sexbots which could disable real human interaction (Sperber, 2024), AI-generated works of fiction risk developing into solitarily-designed-and-read texts that discourage human connection. Communication is left out. Even worse, isolation and loneliness are known to be health risks and a significant contributing factor for depression (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015; Erzen and Çikrikci, 2018), a situation that Haidt (2024) argues technology is already making worse.

Even the feeling of unity with the author and the eventual audience, as stressed by Indian rasa

theory, is obsolete if there is no human author and not even a further human audience. When books are no longer authored with a wider public in mind, reading becomes a more solitary experience.

4 Discussion

AI is here to stay, and some kind of accommodation is necessary both from a technology-centered view and a human-centered approach because “ubiquitous” does not equal “good” – just as cigarettes were commonplace (Gardner and Brandt, 2006) so could a hypothetically-toxic AI become a major part of our lives. We therefore agree that some kind of “control institution” will emerge to ensure that fiction does not have destructive consequences for the individual or society. Whether this institution will be a concrete organization or a set of laws, guidelines, and customs is still unclear. We argue for a balance between the greatest possible agency of the individual user, which helps to establish the Internet as a free, uncensored space where creativity and new ideas can flourish, while also protecting both the individual and the population.

Censoring individual words or phrases seems a losing proposition both from a technical and societal point of view: workarounds will always be found and it is a user’s prerogative to have full, uncensored access to these tools along with the responsibility for what they do with them. A point of disagreement is whether censored systems still have a role to play in modern society. One author considers that such mechanisms will always be arbitrary, neglecting possible positive effects of “evil” concepts such as the occupation with the inevitable terror of life and limiting inventiveness to an unacceptable level. Another author believes that there’s value in ensuring that users are not accidentally confronted with uncomfortable and potentially dangerous ideas. We nonetheless agree that users need to be taught how to use these tools in a way that expands their creative horizons. Blindly accepting AI suggestions is more likely than not to constrict and bias the users’ creativity, leading to more homogeneous, less vibrant, and less creative works.

Formal education needs to adapt to this new landscape. We need continued, strong education programs ensuring that students deal more critically with content no matter who generates it, applying critical thinking to the reliability and intention behind their social media feeds, their effects in shaping their daily environment, and how to better

engage with controversial topics. Teaching how to write prompts that include social issues, new perspectives, personal trauma etc., is how we avoid complacent self-reflection and “tech bubbles”.

Finally, we believe that the figure of the author will become increasingly important, putting the focus back on the human being. Misselhorn (2024) argues that art requires an artist who takes responsibility for the recognition or criticism of a work, and Deleuze and Parnet (1987) write that “In the act of writing lies the attempt to make something out of life that is more than personal, to free life from that which imprisons it”. Manovich and Arielli (2024) further argue that “artists are different from normal people”, but whether this special status of the artist is still desirable at a time when everyone can easily create art remains debatable. Crucial to this debate are tools to reliably identify AI-generated texts, as they would return readers their agency regarding when and how to let AI works into their lives and would turn the concealment of AI authorship from an oversight into a deliberate act.

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