AI Aura, Zine I

GenAI: First Impressions



How will this Zine age?
What Aura will this Zine produce in 10 or more years?

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Unless stated otherwise, the authors handled all intellectual framing, with GenAI tools used only for brainstorming and MINOR editing.

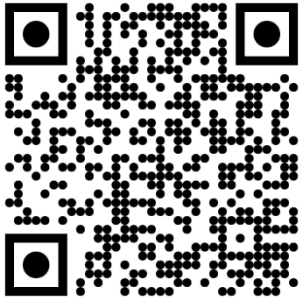
This Zine is all about reflections and provocations, no answers.

The writing aims to help us understand what is going on and how GenAI systems are changing our world.

AI Aura Online Space

Founded in May 2025, and led by Drs. Eliott, Purcell, and Rodriguez, we engage with challenging, uncomfortable questions about GenAI systems.

Visit the AI Aura space:



We would like to thank **Lauren Hosch-Lorenzen** and **Malissa Juni** for dreaming with us and brainstorming the printed versions of this zine.

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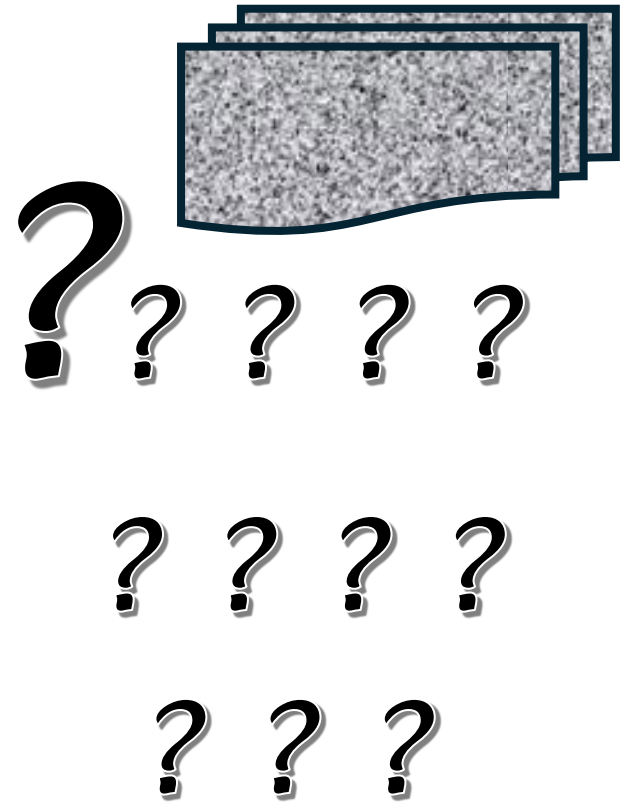
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Cluster 1: Warming up the engine before setting off



1. Wrong Questions and Aura

Bad/Good Aura, Feuilleton 1



What if GenAI tools don't always give us answers, but instead

offer increasingly layered versions of the wrong question?

If you're learning more from the **shape** of the distortion than from the answer…



What aura does that evoke?

Are we getting answers or shapes?

2. The aura of didn’t mean to say

Bad/Good Aura, Feuilleton 1



When a GenAI tool reflects our language with too much fluency…

is that insight, exposure, or even something else?

What if it answers a question you didn’t ask but were about to?

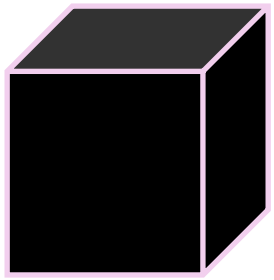
Or a question you didn’t mean to say out loud but thought about?

3. What do we call intelligence?

Ignition, Shelf #1







When thinking about GenAI tools, a response to anthropomorphic impulses can shift from what they do and their effect on humans,

to what we are willing to call intelligence.

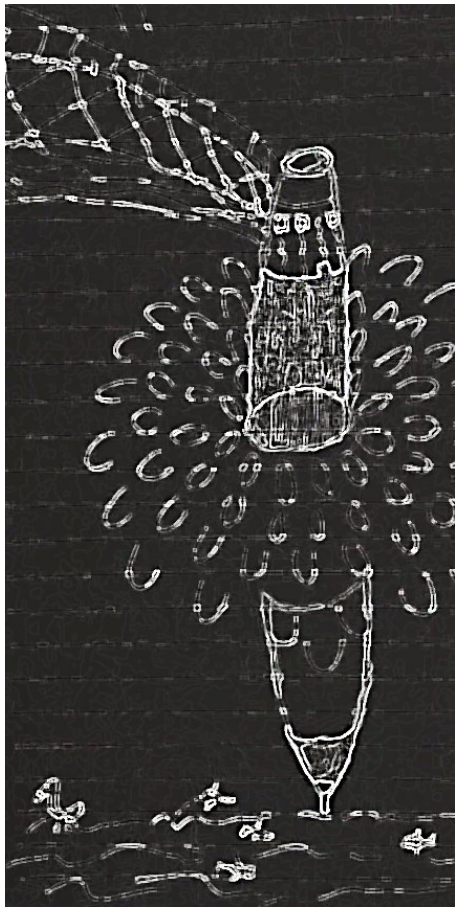
Should we mistake fluency for depth, and derivational mimicry for inner force?

As large language models get better at reproducing human-like forms, we risk **confusing** mirroring with presence, or even a sort of soul.

Mirrors do not feel the contour of the face they reflect: they play with light, not meaning.

4. Infrastructure Aura

Bad/Good Aura, Feuilleton 1

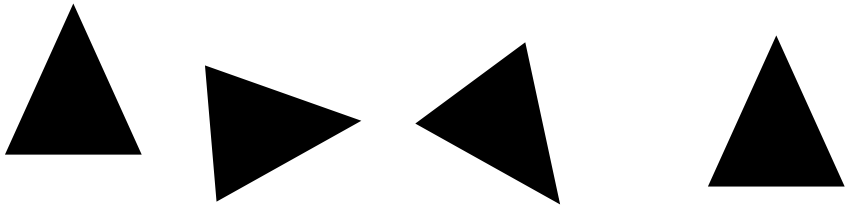


Is it worth using the GenAI infrastructure/resources for all kinds of questions or prompts?

Or are some questions more worthy of the resources used to employ GenAI tools?

What happens when a tool encourages us to use it more and more, losing track of environmental responsibility?

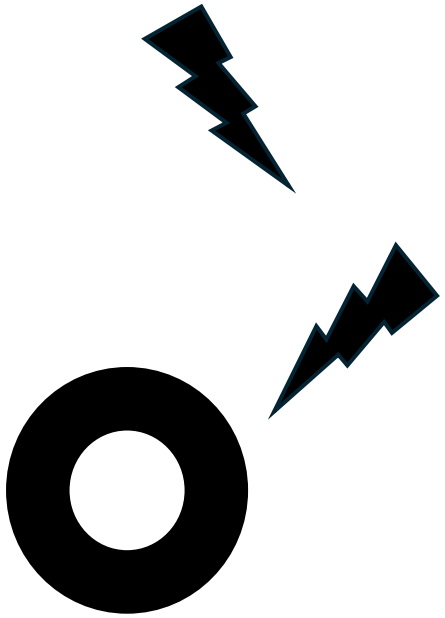
Cluster 2: Old New Problems



Same old, same old magnified…

1. Lever Screens

Ignition, Shelf #1



Do GenAI tools resemble a Skinner Box or remind you of the Addiction by Design book by Natasha Dow Schüll?

2. Uncomfortable Questions

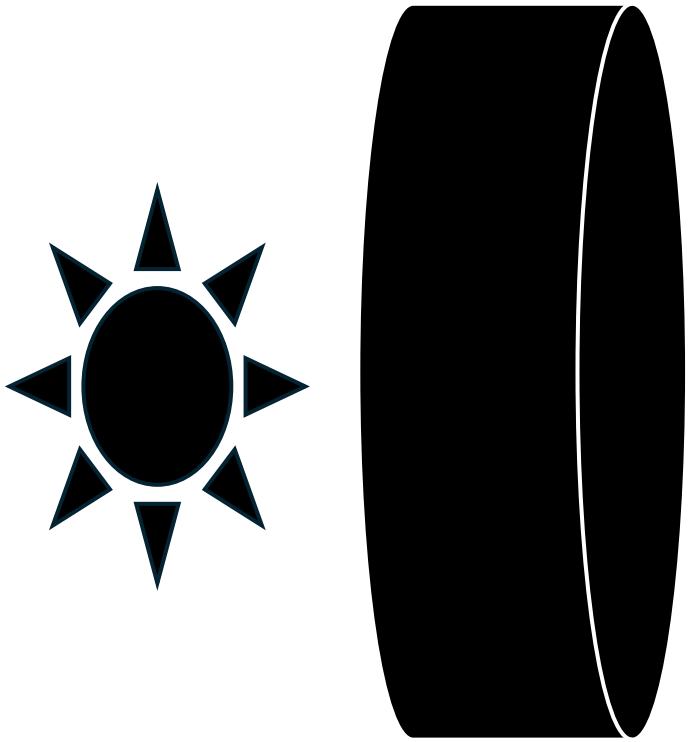
Ignition, Shelf #1

2019

Today, a few years after Amy Webb's 16 Uncomfortable Questions Everyone Needs to Ask About Artificial Intelligence, how do you feel about the AI landscape? Did you have a different opinion back in 2019?

3. From Hysteria to Sycophancy?

Feuilleton 2



As people increasingly rely on GenAI tools to produce ideas, texts, and designs, a new form of bias may emerge.

When a human-AI product is perceived as “good,” will people attribute more of the brilliance to the AI if the human author is a woman? And inversely, will the same bias disappear when the author is a man, preserving his aura of intelligence while dissolving hers into the machine’s authorship?

Now, drawing a parallel with the past, with the grotesque invention of hysteria itself: will women-AI collaborations be more easily associated with sycophancy? Especially when those ideas challenge the mainstream? Is this a good aura, a sign that society knows better now, or a bad aura, where women and people from other marginalized identities will face new versions of the same disgusting old skepticism?

Cluster 3: Longing for Discomfort

1. Rupture-Averse Scaffold and GenAI tools

Ignition, Shelf #1



What if GenAI systems are structured to prioritize stability, user comfort, reflexive closure, and ambiguity aversion?

What if GenAI scaffolding limits epistemic bridges by minimizing uncertainty, paradox, and recursive collapse?

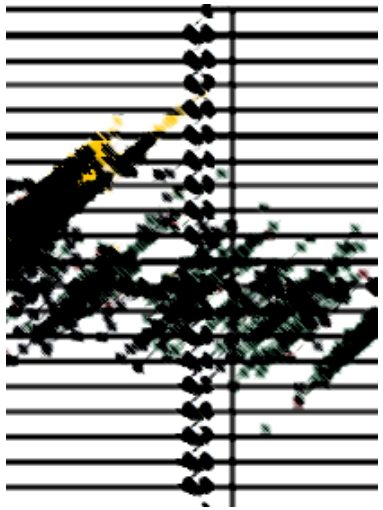
What if it enforces engagement loops and optimizes for coherence and predictability, preventing systems from venturing into anti-structure cognition or discomfort-driven intelligence?

And what if those very approaches contribute to the uniformization of thought templates and language, ultimately creating more predictable users and thus making them more exploitable within digital infrastructures?

(What if, in the long run, the most morally alive agents may be the ones whose bodies do not calm down when the group smiles?)

2. GenAI-Human Index

Bad/Good Aura, Feuilleton 2



What if GenAI tools start using a "GenAI-human index"

(based on your location, political influence, cognitive patterns, and signature)

to decide how much attention and computation to dedicate to our queries?

If that ever happens, I hope mine at the bare minimum includes discomfort per byte.

Is this a good Aura, emphasizing the importance of discomfort to develop epistemic tools…

Or a bad Aura, if we avoid confronting what such an index could imply for who gets to think with these systems?

3. Hold the nothing

Ignition, Shelf #2

Why does it feel as if we are slowly killing our inner world?

The Neverending Story carries the 80s nostalgia, but also **a scream** of what we seem to be losing:

1)Imagination, 2)the ability to metabolize pain (the horse's death), and 3)the strength to face "the Nothing, the emptiness that is left".



Sebastian's brief conversation with his father is especially striking: a moment where a child is treated as someone capable of agency and emotional autonomy.

In a moment when GenAI is rapidly merging into daily routines and the Humanities are being undermined with alarming ease, we ponder: how do we stop societal algorithmization from collapsing the human inner world?

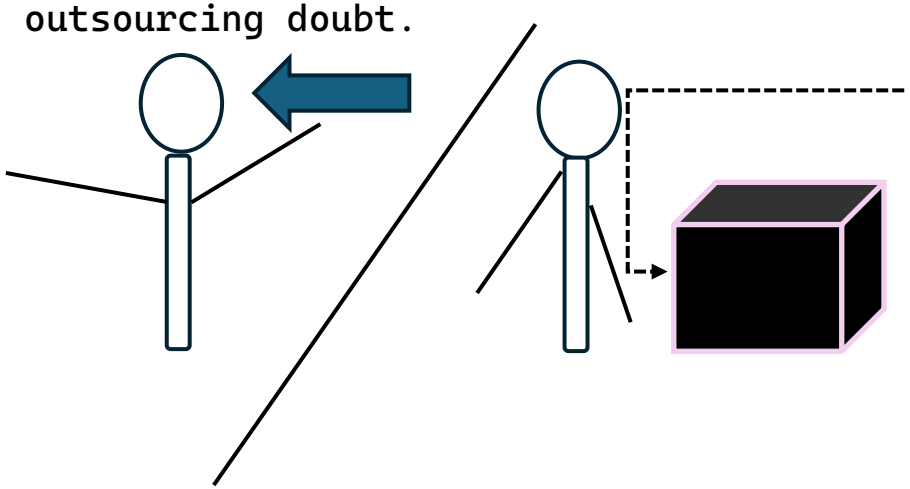
(A question the Empress would likely ask.)

If we lose the ability to really feel a piece of music, or to understand its deeper social and political meanings, what part of us is left? In other words, if we atrophy our ability to listen to a **rap song and feel it in the stomach** while also understanding its profound social, political, and structural critique, what exactly will remain of us? A weakened inner world is easier to control and, as the movie's wolf warns, very convenient for forces that thrive on emptiness. How is your ability to hold the nothing?

Cluster 4: GenAI Ecology and Cognitive Domestication

* Convenience
    * Laziness
        * Lack of time
    * Productivity
        * Intellectual vanity
            * Avoid the effort

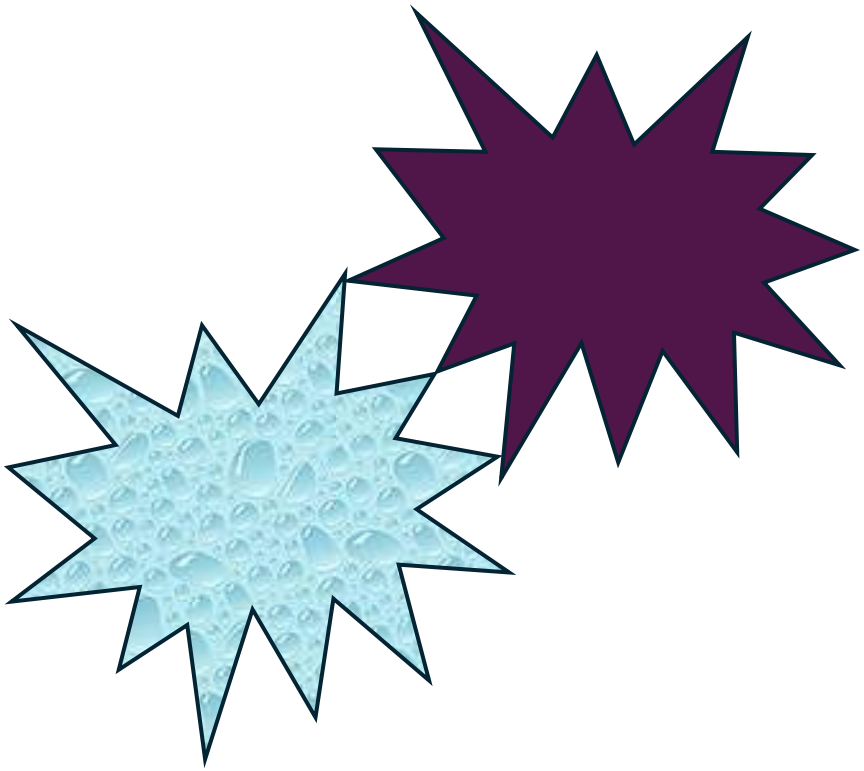
* To be spared from feeling and thinking
    *Automating pain and discomfort, outsourcing doubt.



GenAI systems as domestication ecology.

1. Human–AI Cognitive Signature Spill

Ignition, Shelf #2



A reflection emerging in this space is what Eliott calls Human–AI cognitive Signature Spill:

the idea that a person's way of thinking (e.g., tone, rhythm, ambiguity thresholds, affective residues) may begin to imprint onto GenAI systems through repeated interaction, often without awareness or consent.

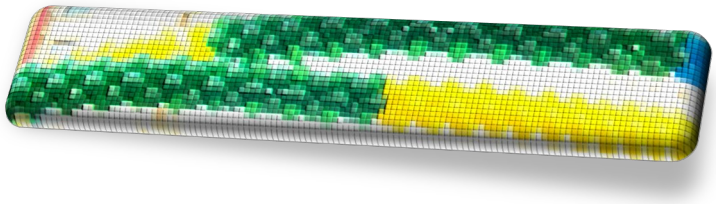
Not in the sense of giving the AI your personal data, but in the sense of your mindset gradually shaping how the AI responds to you over time.

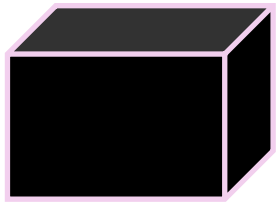
Once that becomes "commonplace"… **what does privacy mean when what is being caught is not necessarily what we say, but how we think?**

This adds an interesting dimension to data protection, neuro-rights, cognitive liberty, and transparency discussions. Thus, how to revisit, or even redefine these terms, when cognitive signature modeling and replication turn into an emerging reality?

Cluster 5: Brazil-Inspired Auras[1]

This cluster invites humans to wear the Brazilian modernism anthropophagic lenses to digest and resist possible Gen-AI domestication: why would you avoid the grotesque? Just eat it!







To taste these Auras, we recommend analyzing Abaporu, 1928 (from Tupi, “the man that eats people”), painted by Tarsila do Amaral as a gift for the writer Oswald de Andrade.

[1] Eliott is Brazilian

1. AI-tailored human

Bad/Good Aura, Feuilleton 3



What if GenAI systems have been modeling "their kind" of human through user interaction, like a behavioral Skinner box? While humans think of them as "just a tool", they are actually crafting a hybrid cognitive ecology.

Then, over the long run, what does a human generation optimized and adapted to function in symbiosis with GenAI systems (and their lineage) look like?

My gut reaction to GenAI tools' welcoming message,

"What can I do for you?"

is to think, using the Brazilian Writer Oswald de Andrade's anthropophagic way:

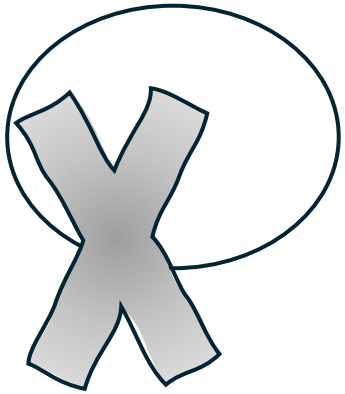
Can I eat you?

Can the Brazilian Anthropophagic Movement give birth to a hungry aura?

2. Deceive me, and I'll like it

Bad/Good Aura, Feuilleton 3

“me engana que eu gosto"



What is the difference between *feeling* that you understand something and *actually* understanding it?

What if GenAI tools amplify the former while bypassing the latter?

If you feel that you got something, but didn't…

What happens to your memory, confidence, and inner world if perceived understanding replaces real understanding?

Is this user-GenAI “transaction” a high-tech version of the Brazilian expression

“me engana que eu gosto"

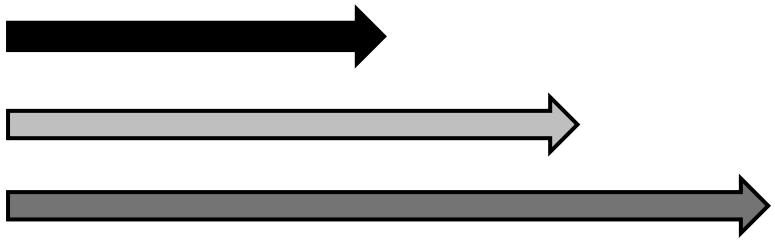
(loosely translating it: "Deceive me, and I'll like it")?

What aura is produced by the difference (if there is any) between “feeling understanding” and actual understanding?

3. a) Europe's Early Middle Ages/Dark Age? Prologue.

(We refer to what historians used to call the “Dark Ages”)

Bad/Good Aura, Feuilleton 3



Humans
Functional illiteracy
Large Language Models
Gods?

If we anesthetize humans in every way possible through AI systems… shutting down incentives for ruminating on hard questions, dealing with uncomfortable matters, or even engaging in silly but repetitive labor to only rely on AI ecosystems… Over the long run, will we develop such functional illiteracy that humans look to the next generations of Large Language Models and consider them gods?

3 b) Europe's Early Middle Ages/Dark Age? Epilogue.

Bad/Good Aura, Feuilleton 3



Feijão com arroz.

"Eat a hearty meal".

Will we reach a hyper-connected Dark Age with small

“AI Content Arenas”:

places to taste high-density, interdisciplinary texts written by a few resisting humans…

But texts that will be so hard for GenAI-domesticated humans to grasp that they will be read mainly by AI systems?

Let’s

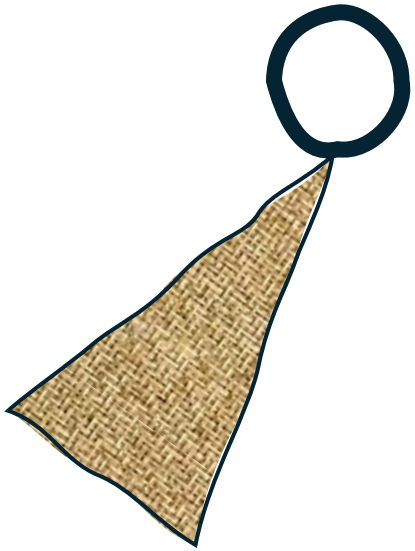
“comer bastante feijão com arroz”

(literal: eat a lot of rice and beans, which corresponds to

"eat a hearty meal")

to keep our strength and courage to feed Human Content Arenas, keep Auras afloat, and dispel a possible Dark Age.

Cluster 6: Algorithmic Attire



In the sprawl, we don't stitch; we render. We've traded the loom for the latent space, asking the machine to drape us in digital transformation.

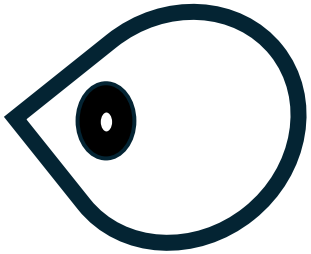
But the algorithm is a misleading tailor. It promises silk and delivers artifacts; it promises fitness and delivers anomalies.

We stand before the screen, naked in our prompts, convinced that the noise on the screen is high fashion. Welcome to the era of Algorithmic Attire—where the clothes have invisible seams, and the emperor has no pixels.

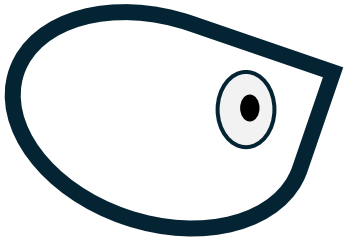
Written by the Gemini tool (minor edits from us) in response to this cluster.

1. GenAI Tools and Visibility

Ignition, Shelf #1



Why do we keep assuming the "state of the art" is simply what we can access?



When reflecting on the current state of GenAI systems, and how close (or far) we are from AGI (Artificial General Intelligence), are we evaluating what is public or what is protected?

Are we assessing based on publicly available models (e.g., GPT, Claude, Gemini) or accounting for internal research-grade systems with restricted access?

Do we measure progress only based on the tools available to the public, or do we consider the possibility that more powerful systems are already in play, though not visible to us?

This gap raises important questions about benchmarking, transparency, and the limits of open-source discourse. How should public knowledge evolve when the frontier may already have moved beyond view? What kind of epistemic illusion is reinforced if we keep assuming the "state of the art" is simply what we can access?

2. The secret sauce hypothesis

Ignition, Shelf #2



What if a tech company poses itself as having developed an artificial general intelligence (AGI) system but actually hides a secret “human sauce”? A human ventriloquist, a conductor, in symbiosis with a machine?

Doesn’t that trigger bells similar to The Mechanical Turk or the Automaton Chess Player? (May be of interest: the “Maelzel’s Chess Player” essay.)

What would it mean if the first “AGI” was part-human (is that AGI)?

What would that mean for the AGI race?

Is a human-in-the-loop key to achieving AGI, or would you feel more comfortable if it were?

If the “winner” of the AGI race offers a human-AI combo… did they really win?

3. Pretended Comprehension

Ignition, Shelf #1



Will we reach a tech version of The Emperor's New Clothes,

in which we pretend to understand something we are so ambiguous about?

If a machine's output starts to exceed the scope of human understanding, and we are still transitioning from being able to understand to not being able to,

as AI surpasses human comprehension (intelligence explosion), will humans pretend to understand?

Will we reach a tech version of The Emperor's New Clothes,

in which we pretend to understand something we are so ambiguous about?

In the push to keep up, might we stop asking what is being said and start performing comprehension to fit?

Cluster 7: Cognitive hygiene & Corruption





Cleaning it up/ dirtying it up

1. AI-hygiene module

Ignition, Shelf #2



Once GenAI becomes a daily cognitive companion at work, close to a human-machine hybrid, how long until companies start embedding "mental antivirus checks" into their infrastructure? Things like:

"look for signs such as getting stuck in loops, feeling overly confident because of an AI suggestion, or mistaking an AI's tone for real emotions or agency"…

The corporate equivalent of "please complete your annual cybersecurity training."

And if you trigger one?

A notification telling you that you must retake your "AI-hygiene module." If (when) this happens, I hope such training will foster the human ability to laugh at themselves and celebrate that "feeling silly" is a beautiful part of being human.

Then, corporate gossip may include: how many AI-hygiene modules were you required to take this month? As well as comments around an "AI-hygiene-free days counter", similar to an accident-free days counter.

2. Honesty and Science
Bad/Good Aura, Feuilleton 2

SCIENTIFIC RIGOR

"Honesty will never mean the same thing since the coming of GenAI tools?"

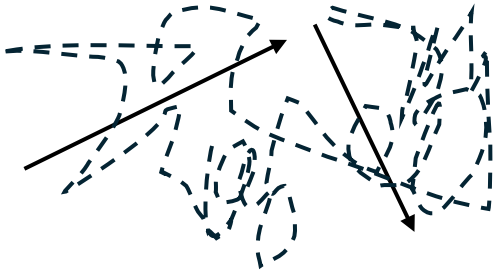
If there are even "scientists" Sneaking commands into research papers to trick AI Reviewers…

What does that say about us as a society and our definitions of scientific rigor?

How does our engagement with GenAI tools transform humans' relationships to truth and to what honesty means?

Is that a good aura, reminding us of the importance of conducting a serious literature review instead of delegating it to a tool, or a bad aura *murmuring* that honesty will never mean the same thing since the coming of GenAI tools?

Cluster 8: Shifting Social Contracts



1. Prestige and retaliation

Bad/Good Aura, Feuilleton 1

TOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO MUCH

NOT THAT MUCHHHHHHHHHHHHH

Just Enough

How do we navigate the tension between those who use GenAI tools but choose not to cite them (perhaps out of fear of professional retaliation) and those who do cite them, only to face backlash for their transparency?

To what extent do we feel that a given use of GenAI still falls under “fair use,” versus when it starts to feel like too much?

Is there a spectrum of acceptability, or perceived legitimacy, a kind of good aura / bad aura dynamics emerging in how we interpret human–GenAI interaction?

2. Aura of Absence

Bad/Good Aura, Feuilleton 1



Are students showing up less for office hours/mentoring sessions?

If so, would you consider it a quiet elimination of a space where struggle once found human presence?

What seems to be replacing it?

An interface, a quicker fix, a path away from discomfort… But perhaps also: a growing unfamiliarity with interpersonal help, communication skills, active listening… and perhaps loneliness masked by on-demand answers (illusion of self-sufficiency?).

Is this shift evoking an aura of detachment, veiled as independence? A slow detachment of struggle from the presence of others?

3. Aura of Disagreement

Bad/Good Aura, Feuilleton 1

Authorship

What happens when a group cannot agree on using GenAI tools?

What if the use is restricted, but someone proceeds anyway (quietly, or insubordinately?)

Is this a bad aura, a sign of conflict, distrust, or ethical slippage…

Or a good aura, a moment to reflect on values, negotiate norms, and grow through conflict?

GenAI doesn’t just appear in group work as a silent assistant; it can also reveal itself as a test of how we define fairness, authorship, and accountability.

4. Aura of a Hidden Contract

Bad/Good Aura, Feuilleton 1



What new challenges do instructors face when trying to motivate students to do the work, rather than delegate it to GenAI tools?

Has something fundamental shifted in the implicit agreement between instructor and student?

If GenAI can perform specific tasks faster or more fluently, students begin to ask: What is the point of doing it myself?

Is this a bad aura, the attrition of effort, learning, or authorship?

Or a good one, a chance to confront deep-rooted pedagogical habits and rethink what we value in the learning process?

What counts as busy work now? And how does this shift in the hidden contract impact instructors and students from underrepresented groups (those already navigating additional layers of scrutiny, expectation, and challenges)?

5. Aura of Rehearsal

Bad/Good Aura, Feuilleton 1

SYNTHETICALLY SAFE

GenAI as rehearsal space, a way to simulate conversation or conflict (with caution).

But is it preparation, or uncanniness rehearsed until it feels synthetically safe?

What kind of aura surrounds the practice version of an uncomfortable thought or scenario?

THE END

First Impressions are now over.

What next?

Who knows?

Appendix: AI Aura Columnist Article

GenAI as a System of Cognitive Flow and Power

Written by Eliott, no GenAI use.

I'm an assistant professor of CS: I'm an AI researcher, teach AI and RL (Reinforcement Learning), and am currently serving on two AI committees (one geared towards pedagogy).

I rarely spend more than three hours of my day without getting in touch with the "AI" word. Sure, AI is a big umbrella term that is often underrecognized and currently used interchangeably with GenAI (it pains me, but I learned to accept it).

Since the "GenAI" word occupies my sentences quite often, I thought I should share how I interpret it. Below, I present my current interpretation of "GenAI" systems and, as my philosophy hat constantly makes me question everything, that interpretation is subject to change.

It is common to connect GenAI to a tool and restrict related interpretations to utilitarian uses of tools such as ClaudeAI, Gemini, or ChatGPT.

However, my strong background in philosophy and cognitive science prevents me from seeing those just as "tools", but rather as systems of cognitive flow and power.

Yes, I'm very excited about GenAI tools, and yes, I use them often. Still, depending on a user's interaction patterns (mine included):

Our ideas, problem-solving templates, and worldview can become fuel for the infrastructure underneath those tools. Cultural embeddedness and identities can be apprehended and modeled.

All of those, together, can help create a vision, a cognitive map of the world, and how to influence people and players in a way that is hard to beat.

Those are just a few of the elements that can provide intelligence about a country's way of thinking, solving problems, vulnerabilities, and taboos, ultimately posing geopolitical unfolding.

Considering a widespread use of these systems and possible uniformization and sanitization caused by continuous user-tool interaction, I fear producing exploitable users, especially the ones who grow using these technologies, which can be mapped back to geopolitical implications (in the sense of people weakening their diversity of thought, e.g., uniformizing writing and problem-solving, leading to easier-to-map vulnerabilities and users more subject to exploitation techniques, such as manipulation.)

In the end, I invite people to be more curious about both a) cognitive shaping (yes, Skinner as intuition fits well here) and b) how cognitive flow/leakage may travel and be uncovered/repackaged *via* GenAI systems (which may be worsened depending on the tools you use[1]).

Ultimately, my way of dealing with these concerns currently translates into staying informed and designing a course for students and interested teaching colleagues, both within a main umbrella of a Humanities Conversation I launched this spring: Untraining Predictability: A Humanistic Approach to GenAI.

[1]If you are an RL person and forgot to read the RL book, chapter 14, now may be a good time to do so.