

Sound of Contagion

Exploring the use of AI as a creative tool

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“Sound of Contagion” (SoC) is a transmedial art project addressing the cultural narratives surrounding global diseases and pandemics through different media. It is borne out of the collaborative partnership between the University of the Arts in Berlin and the University of Oxford. Chelsea Haith (Oxford), Robert Laidlow (Royal Northern College of Music) Wenzel Mehnert (UdK Berlin) as well as Sara Laubscher (Free Illustrator) are collaborating on this project to explore the use of Artificial Intelligence (A.I.) in creative processes to build a storyworld that serves as the basis for narratives, illustrations, musical compositions and live performances.

Collaborators

The project concretised in response to the 2020 pandemic. It is based on fictional narratives created through a machine learning algorithm. We used texts about pandemics (from Oedipus Rex to Afterland) as a set of training data for an algorithm to generate new text objects. From these we extracted narratives, designed a story-world and came up with a nested narrative structure – a story within a story within a story, written by an AI and contextualised by humans.

Background

The nested narrative became the starting point of our endeavor. From there, we created podcasts that explain the process more in depth, composed musical pieces inspired by the text, illustrated important scenes, presented everything in an one-hour Lecture Performance in Oxford and invited other artists to join our learning process as part of a three day workshop / hackathon at the University of the Arts in Berlin.

Outcome

Besides the aesthetic and creative output SoC is also a research project exploring the use of A.I. as a creative tool. Through the collaboration of artists and technology, the imaginary that A.I. can independently and consciously create art is shifting to the notion of A.I. as a tool that supports and encourages creative processes. In this way the project points to the aesthetics and cultural-semantic flaws that are unique to the creative output of A.I. works, and challenges the myth that A.I. could replace authors, poets or other creators of art, entertainment or fiction in general. Thus the work follows a collaborative paradigm and acknowledges A.I. as a creative tool with its own agency and a unique aesthetic. By using them in a creative process, A.I. makes an important contribution to new art forms and fosters inspiration for artistic practices. Our research results were presented on a scientific conference in Braunschweig about the use of A.I. in creative practices.

Research

The following report is an insight into some of the results. For more information please visit our [website](#) or listen to our [podcast](#).

Nested Narrative

The narrative consists of three layers, each being a story within a story. In the following, each layer will be explained with a short text excerpt. The total text can be found on our website. The three pieces of concept art that you'll encounter as you read are by Sara Laubscher.

First Layer

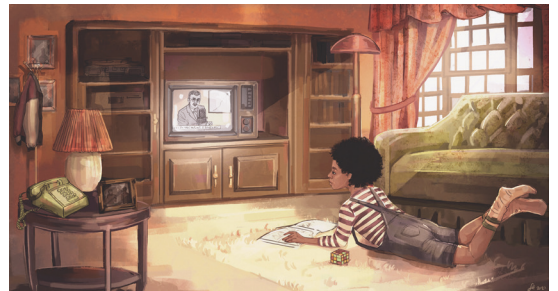
The first layer opens in the European middle ages and features the characters Mannum, an evil monarch who starts a war with a bioweapon which turns into a pandemic, and a doctor by the name of Piranesi, who may or may not have helped Mannum with the development of this weapon. The pandemic referred to here is the Plague.



„They came to a real leader, they said to each other. A real man, not a fake leader, not an actor who pretended to be a leader. He was real. He lived, and he led his people to a real leader. This real man was the one they called their real leader. He was named Mannum, and Mannum knew this about himself; he had practiced seduction and charm the long time. He was a good liar, a real one. The pandemic of war had begun.“

Second Layer

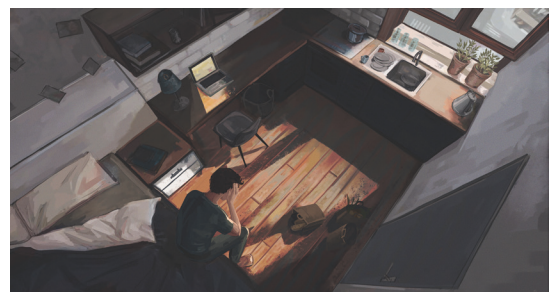
In the second layer we discover that the story of Mannum and Piranesi is the plot of a graphic novel. In this layer, a little African American girl is reading the graphic novel about a bioengineered plague while listening to a newscast about a pandemic, a referent for the Aids crisis.



„The pandemic is spreading. In a few weeks, it will overtake Mexico and other tropical areas. But in Asia and Africa, the areas in which pandemics have been known to be spread, now less than three weeks of a second or a thousand days. What follows will determine the first and maximum periods of international isolation.“

Third Layer

The third layer reveals that both the girl and her reading material are elements of a novel that a young man is writing while isolated during the present-day COVID19 pandemic. It brings us back into the current times and our own situation.



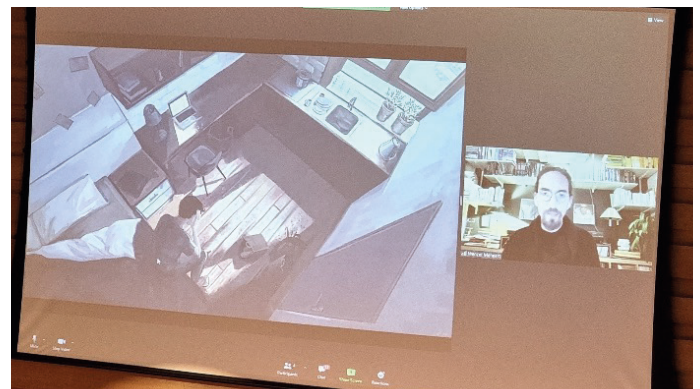
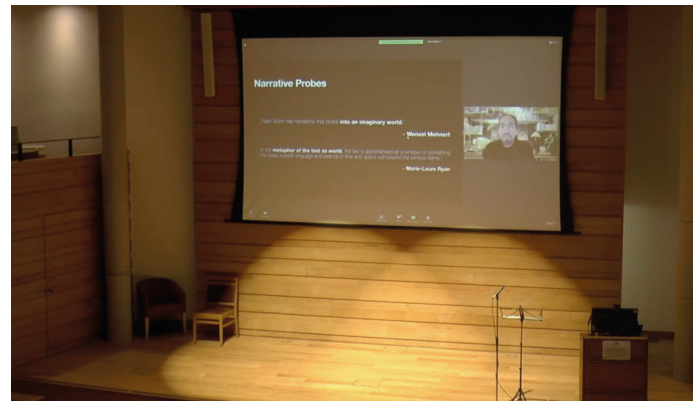
„He had always thought of his childhood as a series of fixed points, and it was a stable foundation from which to build his life, but the vast majority of his memories were temporary and uncertain, not anchored in any place. His childhood was the single largest fixed point of all his life, and it was the defining moment when he first decided to become a Writer.“

Lecture Performance & Exhibition

The results of the project were presented in form of a lecture performance and an exhibition in November, 2021 in Oxford UK. Due to the Covid restrictions, the performance was hybrid. Chelsea Haith, who gave an input into the background of the project and Wenzel Mehnert, who presented the narratives, took part via zoom. The Bandwidth Ensemble, a UK based string ensemble, were on stage in Oxford and presented songs that were composed by Robert Laidlow, as well as Marco Galvani, and inspired by the narratives created by the A.I.

Public Engagement

After the performance there was an engaged Q&A-discussion with the audience, reflecting on the role of A.I. in creative processes and the use of A.I. as a creative tool. We also presented the artwork in a separate room where participants had the chance to discuss the topic of the project more in-depth.



Video Documentation

The whole event was accompanied by a filmcrew. They documented the performance and interview Chelsea Haith, Robert Laidlow and Wenzel Mehnert about the project itself. The results were cut together in a 3min long image video which is available on the project website:

<https://www.soundofcontagion.com/>



Workshop

In May 2022 we hosted a workshop for artists and academics working in Artificial Intelligence (A.I.) and Creativity at the UdK in Berlin, Germany. For the workshop, we invited musicians, illustrators and other creatives who are working with and exploring the use of A.I. as a tool in their creative practice.

The three-day workshop offered a space and opportunity to exchange ideas, reflect and to explore what it means to understand A.I. as an artform. Within the three days, the selected participants developed projects in collaboration with others, with resident Sound of Contagion performers, and with artists from other disciplines. The projects were presented in a live performance and exhibition on the third day.

In total, we had 16 participants from Berlin, England, India and South Africa, coming from fields like Sounds-Design, Composition, Illustration, Game-Design, Visualarts, Performances, and others.

Currently the dialogue around artificial intelligence is dominated by extremes: it will exert a defining influence on the future through a singularity; it can never understand human emotions; it will develop its own consciousness; it is merely a fad that will fade in the next decade. But what about the artistic practice? What role does intelligent technology play in the art of today and tomorrow? This three-day workshop calls for artists and musicians to exchange ideas and experiences when working with AI as a collaborator, tool or agent to create art.

*Excerpt from the
Workshop Call*



Scientific Outcomes

The project was presented at a conference for AI-art at the University of Braunschweig. We are currently working on a publication that will reflect on the process as well as the creative collaboration between Humans and AI. The talk in Braunschweig is also available as a video here:

[Artificial Intelligence – Intelligent Art? Human-Machine Interaction and Creative Practice](#)

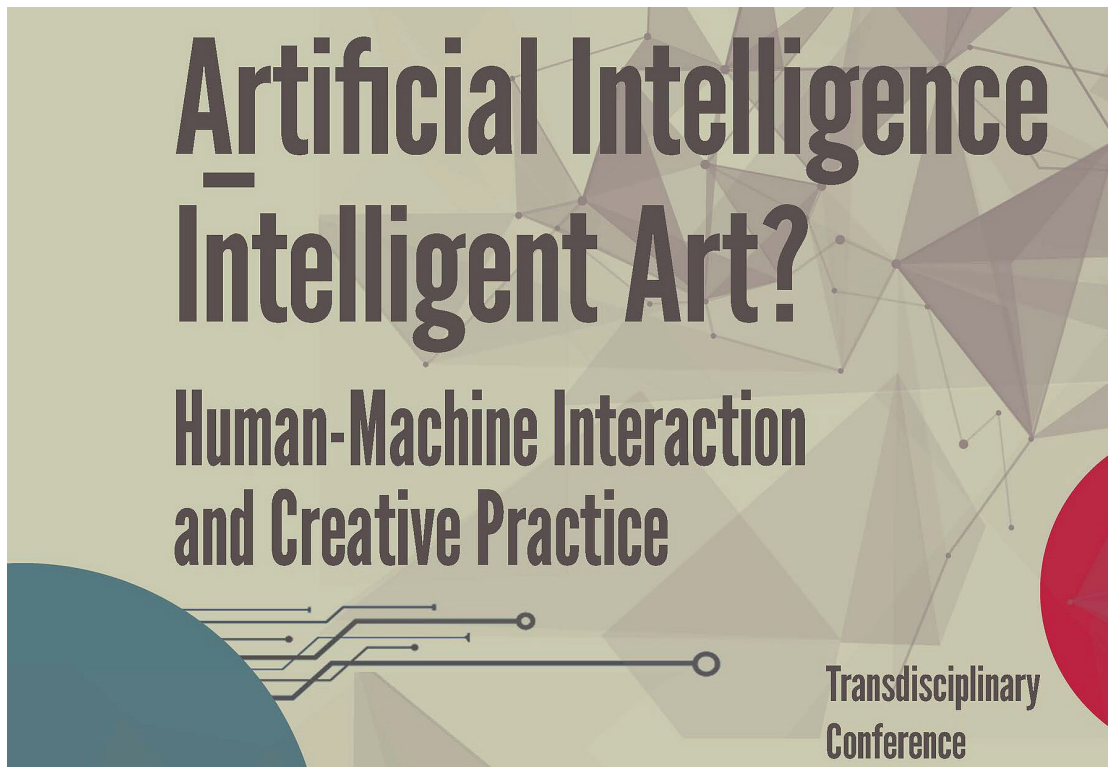
„Sound Of Contagion“. An artistic research project exploring A.I. as a creative tool for transmedial storytelling

*Excerpt of the
Abstract*

“Sound of Contagion” is a transmedial art project addressing the cultural narratives surrounding global diseases and pandemics through different media. It is borne out of the collaborative partnership between the University of the Arts in Berlin and the University of Oxford and explores the use of Artificial Intelligence (A.I.) in creative processes to build a storyworld that serves as the basis for narratives, illustrations, musical compositions and live performances. Texts written by a machine learning algorithm and trained on narratives about pandemics from the last 2000 years serve as the starting point for the project.

(...)

This talk is an insight into this project understood as a case study of how Artificial Intelligence is used as a creative tool within an interdisciplinary collective working in fields like literature studies, cultural studies, composition and visual arts.



*Conference poster
credits: Mirette Bakir
/TU Braunschweig*