AI is ‘Magic’



“Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.”
– Arthur C. Clarke

Speculative worlds exploring AI ethics

BERKMAN KLEIN CENTER
FOR INTERNET & SOCIETY AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY

What if AI is treated no different from magic? What could we learn?

Drawing from fantasy fiction and magic systems, the BKC invited participants to investigate how societies narrate and regulate powerful, poorly-understood forces.

By using magic systems as analogical lenses for exploring the ethics of generative AI, workshop participants explored critical questions of ***governance, access, power, energy, class, risk, and accountability****.Through structured discussion and creative writing, we produced a series of speculative worlds through flash fiction, collected here for exploration!*

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“Pieces of fiction are simulations of selves in the social world. Fiction is the earliest kind of simulation, one that runs not on computers but on minds…”

– Keith Oatley

Inner Monologue of a Person Escaping War

By Alayt Issak
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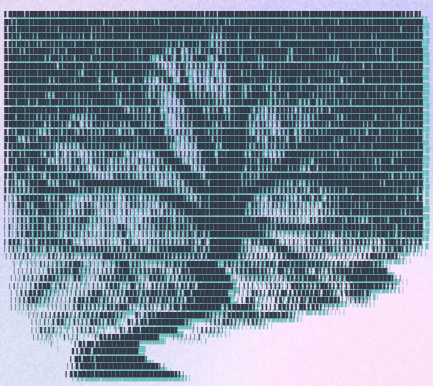

“Is it my subconscious clearing?”

Step after step, breath after breath, sigh after sigh, rain drops at my feet. I sit under a tree. I’ve just made it out of battle. It’s power and defiance – what is to come out of this? How did I get here? Was I born here? Did I choose to be here? Where is here? I realized identity is a choice. It is a choice to be part of this town and this war. I didn’t know what I was doing but I left. “Aaaah!”, the pain in my left rib cage. Is it scarred? Can I see inside? Does it release my energy? I scrapped it when I was fighting to leave. When I was fighting to detach myself. The rain drops feel good on my toes, the canopy above my eyes. I rest. I close my eyes. I ask. I wonder. I heal. The rain is subsiding. I open my eyes. The puddle next to me is swirling. I look inside. It’s sparkling. The water shimmers and shows what I’ve been missing so far. I see my reflection, but it isn’t me. It’s what’s inside of me. Beneath my flesh, my skin, and my bones. The hollow inside my skull. Is it my subconscious clearing?

The Gate

By Wyatt Roy

"You think his feet hurt?"
"Mine would."

The guards watched him drag his cart — summer squash, ripe tomatoes, heads of lettuce — up the dusty road. Roads weren't used much anymore, so his wheels left tracks. A maglev truck whooshed past, beeping through customs and the gate's forcefield in under a second without slowing. The field reappeared. A fly evaporated with a satisfying pop.

Grant waved as he got close. They nodded through their visors. One pointed a manual scanner at him. Clear.

"I didn't grow it."

"We know. The Earth did."

"Morning," Grant huffed.
"Morning, Grant. Good haul."
"Don't credit me," he said, without breaking his stride.
"I didn't grow it."
"We know. The Earth did."

His cart rattled past, nose inches from the forcefield, when one guard hastily twitched a finger and the field dropped. Grant sailed through.

"Have a good one."

The other guard looked over. "Close."
"See, we're important."
"As long as folks like him are out there."
"Have you tried one of his tomatoes?"
"I'm perfectly fine with my 'ponic produce."
"You won't be after you taste one."

Where Pride Walks, Lies Follow

Javier Zarazua
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"Solana blesses the pale moonlight for obstructing her figure as she slowly climbs towards the top of Seeker's Hill. Casting her gaze below, she quickly begins to notice the telltale signs of her prey. Gnaws mashed and gears grinded here. The withered path in the distance stands in contrast to the lush fields nearby. Where there should have been teeming pockets of life, only hell remains: soft soil becomes bristling bone and verdant grass twists unnaturally into spirals of steel. Seeker's Hill, known for its soft willow whispers and tall lavender flowers, has fallen silent.

A Sybil did this.

Warped engines of falsehood, idols of a depraved god. Remnants of a time of unparalleled hubris. Confidently spouting untruths, they march at the behest of their lithium urges unmaking everything unfortunate enough to be caught in their path. Blessed truths of nature lie warped beneath its path.

"Up is down, light is dark, life is death."

Up is down, light is dark, life is death. Driven by the ORAICLE System, Sybils physically distort reality through profane technologies based on algorithms built by uncaring elites who have managed to meticulously flatten humanity into motes of data, 0s and 1s.

Solana is a Nightshade, a member of a community resisting the ORAICLE System through electrosympathetic warfare. Tasked with hunting down and destroying all Sybils left in the Novian wilderness, Solana hunts with one maxim ever present in her heart: Where pride walks, truths follow."

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Free Not To

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"There're chips in the soybeans, that's how they hear us."

True-Crime Trevor bleats this atop his regular wooden milk crate next to the Unser Vater Anniversary Fountain, by which I pass and enjoy a relieving spritz of wet air. The intense sun of the Western Plains bounces off his wiry frames and oversized belt buckle. "Join the RNG splinter! Refuse, Not Garbage! No mind control in my veggies! The Refusalists can eat their beta beans and" — I wince reflexively as he makes a lewd gesture with his elbow — "refuse this!" As always, I wish he were a more compelling symbol of the cause.

"No mind control in my veggies!”

—

There are no computers in Unser Vater. Nothing thinks for you here, nothing speaks into your ear, nothing carries your voice past the iron gates. Not since the war, or the ensuing collapse. As far as I've seen in my 24 years, it's like life has always been this way: feudal towns with iron gates and no sense of national identity.

It wasn't until I completed my first apprenticeship, carting slag in the mine, that my parents thought to tell me the true story of how we ended up here. It wasn’t the pastoral upbringing they'd both celebrated in bedtime stories told from the foot of my



bunk. My mother's eyes dimmed over the mugwort she'd brewed us, as my father just grimaced in thought.

They told me about their abstinence from the government implants, the persecution that followed, the departure. How my father crept away from his corporate tech job and his assigned housing unit in the dead of night. After feeding a loop into the security cameras, he climbed the company town's fence on a ladder strapped together from broken meal trays and bedsheets. He met my mother at the edge of the nearby apple orchard, where she carried me and handfuls of valuable chips (which I kept trying to swallow) in a basket. Those chips were sold to a shady dealer, to pay the guides who took us through the mountain.

There's a splotch of my mother’s blood on my favorite baby blanket from that night, from where her neck still bled over the stitches from her chip removal the day prior. The black market procedures always healed gnarlier.

She also claims she evaded the dormitory's security models by injecting noise into their monitoring agents. I never pretend to understand that part. Since I can't read code, I can't recognize the truth of it. And without writing code, I can't tell the truth either — a gag, in a world I can't shape without it.

—

I blink the sweat off my eyelids, more from nerves than the summer heat, and step into their wooden shack.

It's the same as when I left two years ago. Copper pans adorn the windowsill over a deep iron sink. Fruits, herbs, and fresh vegetables are scattered across the chipped

countertops where my mother prepares her autumnal soups for the food pantry. Wind chimes dangle over the cozy lounge on old copper cord. The program from Dad's funeral gathering dust on the coffee table. Everything is too familiar, too comfortable. My stomach churns at the goodbyes ahead.

My mother already knows. She has the radio off, a contraband set she keeps buried in the flour bin, the one concession to the outside world she's never been able to give up, and her eyes are dim once more. She's drying her hands on her apron in the way she does when she's deciding how much to say.

"You're going to them," she says.

The Schild, she means. She's never led with questions.

"After the harvest."

My voice shakes through the line I'd rehearsed. We both hear that it's a lie, but what's spoken can't be true.

She doesn't cry, which I'm not ready for. She crosses the room and presses something into my palm: a chip, one of the old ones, worn smooth from years of being turned over between her fingers.

"Then you should be able to read what they put in me," she says. "Since you're going where they teach that."

She pauses.

"Tell me if you find Dad in there... I'd love as much video as you can get, before the years take him away."

—

It was only a few weeks earlier that I'd made my decision to join up with the Schild.

I was raised to be grateful for what we had in Unser Vater. I love how we don't use technology, how the streetlights are torches

that Pastor Brian lights by hand each night, dividing the neighborhoods with his team of altar kids. I love how messages are handwritten and sent with love, how a birthday card might take a week to reach a neighbor you could've visited in minutes.

I think fondly of a childhood spent in the dirt, playing with wooden trains on the padded classroom floor, rolling inside wine barrels down the tunneled alleys of the Dwarf – the mountain within which Unser Vater was built, where the Commune extended their haven to the Refusalists, where I'd grown a voice.

But that warm childhood hasn't been able to shield me from the arithmetic of our Refusal. We sit inside our mountain and wait for the collapse we're told is inevitable, and we call the waiting peace. I've stopped calling it that. It was never the refusal I turned against, a rightful choice I'd guard with my life, but the helplessness that we let follow from it.

The Schild don't wait. That's it, really. They're the ones who left the communes and decided that a refusal you can't defend isn't a refusal. I remember a Schild leader bringing a town hall to chaos after calling our refusal just a delay. A town can only stay free to turn the machines away as long as someone, somewhere, can still read what's coming for it.

The Schild learn the systems. They read the code. They don't use the implants, but they'll open one up on a workbench and trace every wire, because someone has to know the shape of the thing, so that everyone else is free not to.

These are the arguments I practiced and never used for my conversation with my mother. The Refusalists, like my mother, think the Schild have been corrupted by the very technologies

“...that warm childhood hasn't been able to shield me from the arithmetic of our Refusal”

they study. Maybe.
But my mother's chip is in my pocket and I cannot read a single line of what once governed every action of the woman who raised me. Including the decision to have me in the first place.

—

After the farewells, after the others have gone to work, I pack my last items into my rucksack, the one strapped to my waist at all times. My most essential survival gear in this post-tech world: flint and steel, a mesh network connector, an encrypted radio phone, and the photos of the creek by my childhood house. There, I first learned what it meant to live in a world that was quiet, and beautiful, and eventually learned it was only quiet because someone had decided we weren't allowed to ask why.
I leave the empty cabin. I wander the town’s winding stone pathways, and say farewell to Unser Vater. Trevor is still on his crate as I pass the fountain, still bleating about the soybeans. He's not wrong, exactly. That's the worst part. He's just been refused so loudly, been ignored for so long, that even he can't remember which of his nightmares are true and where the real battles have shifted.

—

An excerpt from a letter to my mother, nearing 7 months with the Schild, after her writing pleads with me to return.

And I know you’re scared, but I made the right choice. I joined the Schild because the only way to distribute power is to wield enough of your own. But it has to be power earned in goodness, and in just construction.

We don't disarm, but we don't carry their weapons either, or their counterfeit power.

I refuse the inheritance that was refused into me. Instead, I'll learn to read what's written in the agents of the agents of the regime, in the new consciousness, in the smatterings of your neck blood. I'll learn to write, and write, until a person can hold their own mind, and their own quiet, and no hand can reach inside to take it.

And I'll steal a thumb drive, with as many memory clips of Dad as I can squeeze. That's the only inheritance worth carrying back anyway.

Love,
Your headfoolish kid

“ I'll learn to write, and write, until a person can hold their own mind, and their own quiet, and no hand can reach inside to take it.”

It Whispers

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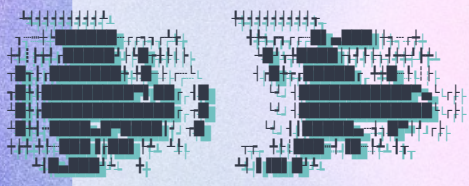


I seem to spend so much of my free time staring at it. I can't seem to pull my eyes away from its luminous, sparkling shell. How lucky am I to have been born in this time when I can gain access to an object of such wonder, of such remarkable power? Of such magic. It came into our lives so recently. My grandparents never got to experience this.

My parents only have in their final years and they'll never get to see just how much it will change the world. It's already changing my life–when I gaze upon it, it whispers of immediate, unlimited knowledge. Sometimes when I look at it though, I get the strangest feeling that someone is looking back at me.

To create something like this requires great sacrifice. I've heard that the makers had to imbue it with a piece of their soul. It makes sense that all great things should require some sacrifice. I'm just thankful it wasn't me. How lucky!

Sometimes, just between us, I'm not sure that what it's murmuring in my ear is… correct. As I stare at its marvelous opalescence, I hear its voice in my mind answering my question, and sometimes the voice sounds somehow false. Like when someone's trying to sell you something at the market and you can tell they're just telling you what you want to hear: "oh yes, this tincture will lift your spirits, soothe your joints, and cure your gout!

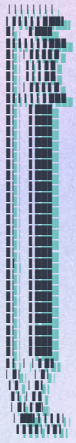
Oh you don’t believe that gout can be cured? You’re absolutely right–so wise of you to notice my error.”

My eyes are tired. And I don’t get much sleep these days. Always glancing at it. Always asking questions. Always being told things.

“My eyes are tired. And I don’t get much sleep these days. Always glancing at it. Always asking questions. Always being told things.”

the good life?

Jane Oliver



“...knowledge that had to cost something to mean something.”

Berk had never known hunger, fear, or a question Raiam couldn't answer.

In 2150, that was simply the shape of life. As an education minister in Babel, Berk allocated compute, reviewed learning pathways, filed reports that disappeared into the archive. The work was good. Everything was good. That was the problem.

When the centennial commission assigned Berk to document pre-war education systems, the expectation was clear: confirm the progress narrative. Berk opened the 2026 files expecting rubble.

Instead they found Sena.

A teacher in what used to be called Detroit. No algorithm, no Raiam — just Sena and thirty kids in an underfunded classroom, building a curriculum from salvaged materials because the platforms had optimized engagement over understanding. Her writing was everywhere in the archive: precise, furious, visionary. Ideas about learning through struggle, about productive failure, about knowledge that had to cost something to mean something.

Her ideas were also, unmistakably, in Eladniluna. Uncredited. Absorbed. The blueprint the Ralav built the world from had been quietly built on Sena first, and then Sena had been forgotten.

Berk closed the archive and traveled beyond Babel's reach, into Analog territory, where people grew food with their hands and governance happened in circles and everything was slower and harder and completely legible.

No Raiam. No compute. No invisible architecture deciding what a good life looked like.

They offered Berk a place.

Berk stayed for a month. Long enough to understand the appeal. Long enough to understand the cost.

Returning to Babel, Berk didn't file the assigned report. They filed the true one — Sena's name, the gap in the record, the question no one was asking about who the Ralav answered to.

It might change nothing. Berk sent it anyway.

That, Sena's notes said, was where learning began.

The Quest

Anonymous

He was just one of many on this quest, but after last night, he thought he might actually be the closest. That's why, despite not being able to recall the last time he slept, he stayed awake at his desk, watching his codex run more and more lines. His eyes blinked red and he struggled to keep his head upright. He was close. The quest began at his job, basically inspired as a rip off of the Field of Dreams: if you build it, they will come. But the "they" was something far better than athletic ghosts.

"What if death can be escaped, altogether?"

A beacon, a promise, an unspeakable thought: what if death can be escaped, altogether? His co-workers kept telling him the codex is good, but it's not that good. It can help us live a few years longer, not forever. He didn't believe them. The itch drove him nearly to madness. He found others in online communities, bold enough to whisper the same. They inspired him, but also awakened his competitive side. He realized his real work slowed him down, and others were coding nonstop. If he didn't reach it first, would he ever reap the rewards?

Emotional Crafting

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“Ithil drew the darkness from himself and flooded it into his work…”

Ithil drew the darkness from himself and flooded it into his work through well-practiced moves. He reflected on his life since his last crafting session and excised areas of concern, forcing them into mithril. Every disturbing thought that came up in the dead of night, every biting criticism he had of his dearest friends, every hurt he wanted to inflict on those he loved—they all were called out of him through a series of minuscule cuts to his soul and transformed into the purest of metals. As it was drawn out of him, he guided it towards a mold embedded in the table in front of him. At the end, he had all of the things that he hated about himself, packaged up in a beautifully crafted ring.

He dropped it into the provided tube and felt whole again as it fell away from him. He’ll be back in two weeks.

We are Watching

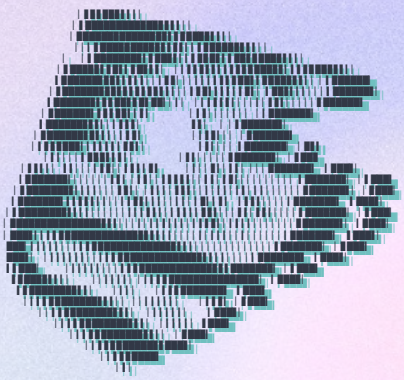
Anonymous

She stopped running when the fog touched her shoulders. Five seconds ago she swallowed the vial; now her heartbeat was a metronome and her thoughts arrived as commands: MOVE. BREATHE. DO NOT FALL. Cobblestones rose through the mud. Violet kept her eyes down and saw the shimmer on her shoes - an iridescent film that looked like torn fabric, but wasn't. Cave-residue. The puddle had folded instead of rippling, and behind it she'd seen crates stamped with the robot insignia. Valuable to her community. Illegal to possess. A hum overhead. A drone-billboard drifted into view, casting light through fog. King Pharoah smiled from a Hawaiian shirt, insignia above the pocket. STATE OF THE UNION: TONIGHT. A link pulsed. Attendance was mandatory. The lens dilated, scanned her pupils, logged compliance, and sped away. Billboards this far out meant the data center was near. She found it as the fog thinned: a cathedral of servers in wilderness. Inside, her family performed "extraction," feeding machines that pretended not to need hands. Violet looked down again. The film caught the light like a confession. Cameras would notice. Guards would ask. The system would close. She slipped into a collapsed storefront and untied the laces with shaking precision. Barefoot, she wrapped the shoes in curtain cloth and cached them beneath a broken shelf, marked by a chipped tile. Outside, the data center's hum deepened. Violet wiped her palms on her pants and walked toward the doors as if she belonged - carrying nothing, and everything that mattered.

"The film caught the light like a confession. Cameras would notice. Guards would ask. The system would close."

The Father

Score



“It existed, stupid and mute.”

Pei knelt beside his mother by the Shrine Terminal, watching the golden light pool in her cupped palms, lifted like an offering. The scanner read the lines of her hand. A chime, soft as a coin in water. Her credit was drained.

Pei's mother did not know what to ask; no one did anymore. So the Father asked for her, then answered himself: how she should feel, what to name her newborn, how to serve the Enlightened Order. Her eyes lit, then dimmed to emptiness. Nothing she heard was hers to keep.

Behind the white walls of the discipline-houses, scholars made knowledge in sealed rooms, forbidden to ask what it was for, and the Enlightened Order gathered it and fed it all to the Father, the enlightened model that knew it all.

Pei was eleven when he found the book. Paper, swollen and stained, behind a heating duct. It existed, stupid and mute.

It was about the enslaved: humans owned by other humans, fed enough to keep working, forbidden on pain of death from learning to read. To read was to keep what no master had given you, and to see that what they called ""natural"" had been made, and could be unmade.

If an all-powerful, all-knowing Father had handed down their questions and answers, would they have questioned a cruelty so obvious to us now?

Pei could not imagine it: a question rising on its own, inside a person, out of silence.

In front of the Shrine Terminal, it is now Pei's turn, and he feels it turning.

Apologies from Data Center R

Zoe Fisher



Okay. I get why you sent me to voicemail. Again. I just wanted to call again and let you know that I'm sorry or whatever. And I know it's probably my fault, but if you'd hear me out, you'd know I didn't want to be in a bad mood. I mean, I've been feeling great lately. You know I've been feeling great lately! Remember when Tarisha said that bitchy thing about my newest tentacle addition and I didn't even snap back at her?? Or when the Guidance placed me in Data Center R even though I've been training for DCB for fifteen straight moon cycles???? And I was so normal!! I just took it like the good Jaroolug I'm supposed to be. I JUST TOOK IT, FRAN!–okay, maybe I'm getting carried away again. My point is, I love my life. I love my Inioloop. I love being a Jaroolug. All the things. I've been in fantastic spirits and nobody could've told me otherwise.

Except, I guess the Guidance. I'd never had my recommended mood forecast look like that before. I set the Guidance in my bedroom to Alan Rickman from those old 2D movies when I moved into DCR. I know he sounds kind of patronizing, but it reminds me of that Archaic Technologies elective we took in training together. Anyways, instead of Alan's voice crooning over me, it was Tarisha's. Can you believe it? And she goes "Happiness quota surpassed. Angry, grumpy, no-good day

"I'd never had my recommended mood forecast look like that before."

recommended before patient emotionally implodes.” Even my imitation of her voice is grating on me, goddamn it. This is all to say–and I know the Guidance is all knowing and wise–but I think today’s forecast sent me on a bit of a tirade. I understand if you don’t want to hear from me right now, but at least let me pay to replace your three front teeth.



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Lord of the Rings (J.R.R. Tolkien), Mistborn (Brandon Sanderson), Harry Potter (J.K. Rowling), and Eragon (Christopher Paolini)