Regenerate

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Abstract

Regenerate is a surreal exploration of grief and estrangement, examining AI's role in emotional expression. The story follows a daughter's journey as she writes her mother's obituary with AI, navigating her grief through technology. By leveraging the unique characteristics of different AI models, *Regenerate* creates a narrative with deep emotional resonance, resulting in a work that would be impossible to achieve without AI. The piece was created using new methods of AI collaboration, demonstrating how novel creativity can emerge from using AI tools in the creative process. This piece is intended to spark crucial conversations about the intersection of technology and human emotion during life's most profound moments.

1 Introduction and background

Regenerate was inspired by a friend who used ChatGPT to write an obituary. While these deeply personal writings are traditionally crafted by those closest to the deceased, with the advent of AI technologies, this age-old practice is being re-imagined. I challenged myself to see if I could express the deeply conflicting human emotions around grief by using AI tools *exclusively*. My goal was to see how far I could push the boundaries of AI-assisted creativity, treating the tools as co-creators in the artistic process, and to discover new ways to engage with emotion and storytelling.

2 Creative process and use of AI

The creative process involved several stages. First, text generation with LLMs. I prompted different AI tools from the main character's perspective, effectively "telling" the story to the LLMs through the prompts. I curated the model's responses to reveal the character's journey, making the AI a character in the story. The second stage was typesetting, where I arranged the resulting outputs to create the final piece visually. Every word was AI-generated, with my role being that of a curator and director rather than a traditional writer.

2.1 Narrative arc

The story begins with the main character using AI to write her mother's obituary. Frustration grows as the tool writes generic phrases she feels untrue. This frustration triggers an outpouring of emotion, leading the AI to suggest she write a letter. Through this process, the story of her estrangement from her mother, caused by the accidental death of her brother, unfolds. The narrative takes the reader through the character's various conflicting emotional states—guilt, numbness, regret, sadness, anger, disbelief—culminating in acceptance. Finally, she is able to write the obituary, including a bittersweet reference to their once-positive relationship.

2.2 AI techniques used for emotional depth

The use of AI in *Regenerate* was deliberate, focusing on how different models and their characteristics could express the character's inner turmoil in ways impossible without AI.

2.2.1 Text regeneration and branching

AI models often begin with high-probability phrases, gradually changing only after several tokens. This technique was used to illustrate the character's process of regenerating the phrasing, systematically going through her memory of what happened, searching for just the right words. It speaks to the character's desire to "regenerate" her relationship with her mother. Several LLMs were used (ChatGPT-4, Claude-3-Sonnet, GPT-3.5, GPT-Neo 1.3B, and GPT-Neo 125m) and outputs "regenerated" for the same prompt multiple times.

2.2.2 Ruminative thought patterns

To depict the character's ruminative thought patterns and distress, GPT-Neo-1.3B and GPT-Neo-125M were used to generate emotionally poignant phrases that became stuck in sentence and phrase-level loops. This common idiosyncrasy of certain LLMs is due to maximization-based decoding algorithms.

2.2.3 Ineffable emotions

Grief often evokes emotions that are difficult to express in words, known as ineffable emotions. By increasing GPT-3.5's temperature settings, thus flattening the probability distribution, I caused the text to lose coherence after a few words, mirroring the character's emotional breakdown.

2.2.4 Difficult memories

The character's struggle to generate positive memories of her mother, coupled with her frustration at not being able to do so, was portrayed using a low-information prompt on a model with reinforcement learning from human feedback (RLHF), ChatGPT-4. This resulted in an exchange where the character attempts to get the AI tool to fill in positive memories of her mother. The tool, with no memories of hers to draw on, of course, fails, and returns a generic response. Asking the LLM to repeat the exercise eventually triggers the LLM to apologize for being unable to complete the task, and asks the character to reflect on her "own fond memories," ultimately bringing the character clarity.

2.3 Typesetting

The typesetting choices in *Regenerate* were carefully considered to reinforce the emotional journey of the main character. Strikethroughs, spacing, and fragmented text were used to visually represent the character's fractured emotional state, her attempts to piece together her memories and feelings, and her journey through the grief process.

3 Artistic and thematic relevance

Regenerate is an artistic experiment that explores AI's potential in new creative processes and its role in deeply human contexts. By leveraging AI's unique technical characteristics, new, previously impossible ways to express emotion emerge, perhaps capturing something profoundly human: the struggle to find words for emotions that defy expression during our most intimate and emotional moments. Could AI help us give voice to our innermost selves?

Moreover, it opens up new avenues for collaboration and co-creation with AI. The method of prompting AI from a character's perspective and curating the outputs explores a new way AI can be guided to tell deeply human stories. By treating AI as character in the story rather than a mere tool, the piece demonstrates how human-AI partnerships can lead to innovative artistic expression. It challenges our traditional notions of authorship and creativity, and encourages further exploration of how AI can be integrated into the creative process to push the boundaries of what's possible.

4 Artist bio

Briana Brownell is a Canadian data scientist and technology artist known for her work at the intersection of creativity and AI. Her diverse projects blend technology with human expression, from AI-augmented writing and music to fashion design and visual art. She has shared her insights through numerous platforms, in TIME's Special Issue on AI, BBC, PBS, Discovery, TED and more.