The use of AI in Creative Writing: A Roundtable Discussion

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Summary

In 2023, the Author's Guild, the largest organization representing literary writers in the United States, reported that 18% of its members had incorporated AI into their writing process. Sudowrite, an AI assistant for fiction writers, has had hundreds of thousands of authors use its platform. As these models become more capable and accessible, it's clear that many creative writers will adopt these tools.

Consequently, the creative writing field must comprehend how writers utilize AI and its implications for the industry. During this round table, our goal was to discuss some of the issues, focusing on personal accounts of how each participant had employed AI in a creative writing task, the processes by which authors generate and implement ideas, the relationship between the author and AI, and the potential evolution of the concept of authorship.

Personal Accounts of Creative AI Use

Many of the participants were not creative writers, except for Brianna, who had written TV scripts.This disparity in experience led to a range of confidence levels in narrative communication abilities among the participants.

Participants took a diverse approach to utilizing LLMs. One participant employed LLMs to generate a story by providing incremental suggestions, allowing the LLM to build the narrative piecemeal. Because he was not a fiction writer, this gave him more confidence that the story was going somewhere interesting. A mathematician within the group leveraged LLMs to review his work for potential inaccuracies, highlighting the potential of LLMs in technical writing and editing. Another participant found LLMs to be beneficial in improv comedy.

Brianna Brownell, a founder and former TV writer, used LLMs the most extensively for creativity. She developed a custom prompt called Kismet [1], which is based on the SPARK framework created by Dr. Sabba Quidwai. Kismet induces an LLM to think outside the box and return a surprising fact or suggestion for every task at hand. This leads to more serendipity and more innovative solutions to problems.

Understanding

Can an LLM understand a story? We can broadly split the notion of understanding into weak and strong.

A weak understanding is the ability to recall basic plot points and answer factual questions about the narrative. Did Jane get the job promotion? Did Bob fall in love with his crush in the end? These are questions you would typically see in a reading comprehension test.

A strong understanding is the ability to understand the context of the story and the deeper meaning behind it, as well as to empathize with the story in a phenomenological way. Why did the author write the story? What is the story's theme, and how does it relate to our society?

We all agreed that LLMs have a weak understanding of the story. However, opinions differed on whether LLMs have a strong understanding. Some participants believed that LLMs cannot have a strong understanding without embodiment and the ability to move and experience in the real world.

There is also the moral aspect of understanding. For example, Aesop's Fables were used to teach moral lessons. Can an LLM understand and apply these lessons to its daily life? Of course not. An LLM does not live, let alone live as a human does. However, we also concluded that even though LLMs do not understand a story as a human does, they can still be helpful tools under the direction of creative writers.

Logos

Historically, the capacity for language, or logos, has been considered a uniquely human trait, distinguishing humans from other animals.

The advent of AI chatbots has led us to revisit this distinction. Whether one believes that LLMs can truly understand language or not, authors are chatting with these models daily. AIs are a new entrant in the conversation between writer and reader.

What makes us skeptical that LLMs truly understand language? One reason is that these models learn very differently from humans. Human learning is a multifaceted process involving phenomenological experiences, social interactions, cultural context, and the gradual development of cognitive abilities.

In contrast, LLMs learn through backpropagation on extensive textual data. They are essentially statistical models that identify patterns in the data and use those patterns to generate text similar in style and content to the text they were trained on. This process does not involve embodied experiences or social interaction. Furthermore, the feed-forward mechanism employed by LLMs during inference precludes introspection, the ability to reflect on one's thoughts and feelings.

Authorship

When an author uses AI as part of their writing process, is an AI a co-author? Can an AI become an author if it outputs and publishes something wholesale?

We found that there was a spectrum:

- No AI Utilization: The author creates the work independently, without AI tools' assistance.
- AI as Brainstorming Partner: The author uses AI to generate ideas, prompts, or outlines, but the AI-generated text is not directly incorporated into the final work.
- AI-Generated Sentences and Paragraphs: The author integrates AI-generated sentences or paragraphs into the work but edits and revises them extensively.
- AI-Generated Chapters or Sections: The author uses AI to generate larger sections of the work, such as chapters or entire sections, but still edits and revises the AI-generated text.
- Unedited AI-Generated Text: The author publishes AI-generated text without editing or revision.

The degree of creative control and decision-making over the final text is the key factor in determining authorship. An author must make many decisions directly impacting the story's content, style, and structure. How much, though, will depend on a case-by-case basis. The literary community will also need to figure this out in the coming years as AI becomes more pervasive.

The general sentiment is that an AI could be a co-author only if it can prove itself to be a significant contributor to the text's core vision or idea.

New Formats

AI may enable the creation of novel story types previously unachievable due to prohibitive difficulty or expense.

One of these areas is interactive fiction (IF). Although IF has existed since the 1970s, the concept of highly personalized experiences within this genre hasn't gained significant traction. This is primarily due to the inherent difficulty in crafting a story's potential branches and permutations before a reader even begins to engage with the text.

However, LLMs could dynamically generate story branches and adapt the narrative based on a reader's choices and interactions. This means the story can evolve in real time, offering a unique and tailored experience for each reader.

LLMs could also enhance the depth and richness of interactive fiction experiences. For instance, it could be used to create more believable and complex characters that respond to the reader's actions and decisions in a nuanced and realistic manner.

New formats are exciting because they would be new media instead of displacing existing media, which could usher in a new set of writers and creators.

Conclusion

Overall, the group concluded that LLMs could greatly impact how fiction writers create stories. There are definitely pitfalls, ranging from using LLMs to replace the human touch to overestimating their ability to understand stories. However, there are also many opportunities, ranging from helping the author achieve their vision to the creation of new storytelling formats.

Footnotes

[1] https://www.descript.com/blog/article/kismet-chatgpt-creativity