AI Baby Jesus: Using a Design Metaphor for AI to Explore Design Fiction

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ABSTRACT

Design fiction has historically been used in Human-Computer Interaction research as a means of speculating about the social ramifications and future possibilities of a proposed technology. However, less work has examined how these design fictions may be helpful for helping us understand the implications of a particular design metaphor. In this short story beginning and accompanying reflection, I explore the implications of a "Baby Jesus" metaphor for AI generated during a workshop with artists and literary writers a couple months prior. I also reflect on the process of writing this design fiction and explore the tension between writing this design fiction and my existing literary fiction practice, exploring the tension between the two genres and what design fiction may be able to learn from literary fiction.

KEYWORDS

artificial intelligence, metaphors, design fiction

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1 INTRODUCTION

Design fiction has historically been used in Human-Computer Interaction research as a means of speculating about the social ramifications and future possibilities of a proposed technology [1]. However, less work has examined how these design fictions may be helpful for helping us understand the implications of a particular design metaphor. Design metaphors are a tool for designers to understand and communicate about a particular technology during the design process by way of analogy [4, 5]. This metaphor may or may not be expressed to the users in the interface as well. The canonical example within Human-Computer Interaction is the Desktop Metaphor, which enabled users to understand computer interfaces by thinking of directories as folders, deletion as a trash can, and windows as overlaid pieces of paper [6].

In this short story beginning and accompanying reflection, I explore the implications of a "Baby Jesus" metaphor for AI that was produced during a workshop with artists and literary writers conducted a couple months ago. I also reflect on the process of writing this design fiction and explore the tension between writing this design fiction and my existing literary fiction practice, highlighting the conventions of each genre and how design fiction may benefit from some of the conventions of literary fiction composition.

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2 REFLECTION

In this reflection, I describe both the motivation for writing a design fiction about the "Baby Jesus" metaphor for AI and describe how the practice of writing this design fiction fell into tension with my regular practice as a literary fiction writer. I highlight some of the conventions of the design fiction genre that I became aware of during the writing process and highlight how some of these conventions may be in tension with the genre of literary fiction, and describe what design fiction may be able to learn from literary fiction.

2.1 Motivation for Baby Jesus AI Metaphor

For this design fiction, I began with an existing metaphor that was previously generated as part of the AI Metaphors Workshop I conducted in December in Toronto. The goal of this workshop was to bring together digital media artists and literary writers to come up with new metaphors for Large Language Models that extend beyond the traditionally anthropomorphized chat metaphors often promulgated by OpenAI and other companies with AI products on the marked. Instead, artists were asked to use their artistic practice to explore what community guidelines should be established for LLMs, what system of care should attention to LLMs, and and the complex ethical quandries which are entangled with LLMs [2].

One of the most provocative metaphors to come out of this workshop was the "Baby Jesus" metaphor which imagined Artificial Intelligence as omnipotent and naive. Pulling from feminist theory, the artist argued that this metaphor was useful because it encouraged users to consider what systems of care may be appropriate for LLMs, to realize that they need to be "fed" with data in order to be created, and to realize that despite the great quantity of information within them, the LLMs remain a nascent technology whose outputs should be taken with a grain of salt.

In the future, our team will create an interactive digital media work based on this and some of the other metaphors for LLMs produced during the workshop. In the case of the Baby Jesus, participants of the AI Metaphors Workshop agreed that depicting ChatGPT as a Tamgotchi which the user had to regularly feed data in order to get responses would make for an appropriate digital media adaption.

With this design fiction, I aimed to explore the origin story of this metaphor and to imagine a world in which the Baby Jesus metaphor



Figure 1: AI Baby Jesus doll created by one of the Members of the AI Metaphors Workshop



Figure 2: AI Baby Jesus doll in the process of creation

could have been born. In doing so, I had to more sensitively consider some of the social and narrative implications of the metaphor. These are implications which I wasn't aware of before writing the design fiction and which may have an effect on the user that I wouldn't have been aware of before writing the design fiction.

For example, in writing the design fiction I was forced to recall the circumstances of the Baby Jesus's birth in the Gospel of Matthew. The Gospel describes how Herold the Great ordered the murder of all male infants under the age of two in Bethlehem but that a small group—the Wise Men and the Sheperds depicted in the gospels—were enthusiastic about the birth of Jesus. In writing this design fiction I was likewise forced to consider who the AI Baby Jesus's opponents may have been and imagine what a strong social contingency in favor of the AI Baby Jesus may be. Unlike in the narrative of the Baby Jesus, I discovered, the AI Baby Jesus would more likely be supported by prevailing government entities and therefore would not be subject to the same persecution as the real Baby Jesus. However, the AI Baby Jesus may be met with skepticism because he is half cyborg, half spiritual being. Considering the contingency of people in favor of the AI Baby Jesus, I began to consider those who believe strongly in LLMs: not just those who are techno-optimists, but those for whom LLMs promises a new world and possibility in a life which is some way dissatisfactory. I recalled a story that was relayed to me by one of the other members of the AI Metaphors Workshop: a filmmaker friend of his had been experiencing an artistic block for years, but playing with Generative AI tools had reawakened his practice and as a result brought him to tears. I imagined a population that would, in some manner, likewise feel disconnected or down-on-their-luck in a manner which made them more excited about LLMs possibilities. In turn, this made me consider those who are excited about AI in the real world who are not techno-optimists: what brings them to excitement about AI? Could a spritual longing be part of what excites these AI-stans?

2.2 Reflection on Process of Design Fictions

I have an existing practice as a fiction writer. My first novel was published back in 2022 by Dalkey Archive Press [3] and other of my work has been published in FENCE, BOMB Magazine, the Los Angeles Review of Books, and elsewhere. I write daily and actively publish literary works and give readings and perform signings. However, though I've often been sent design fictions or other narrative forms of Human-Computer Interaction papers for peer review, I have never used narrative forms or storytelling in my practice as an a academic. Below, I'd like to reflect on some of the tensions I noticed between my existing habits and skills developed from years working in the field of fiction writing and contrast them with some of the pressures I felt while writing for an HCI audience. Some of these pressures contradict with the training I received during my MFA and with accepted values within the literary community. I describe ways in which these tensions may be of use to the design fiction world.

First, in writing this piece, I felt a pressure to consider narrative movement over descriptive language in scene. The reasons for this is that I'm aware that a design fiction will be analyzed for design implications in the form of an academic discussion. These academic discussions will be more difficult to have if the text is ambiguous and contains details for which the implications for design are less clear. Narrative turns, in contrast to descriptive langauge, tend to be more abstract and overt in a manner which lends itself to ambiguous discussion. For instance, the story makes mention of an "uncertainty, which had grown in the town since the Fios cables had been installed," among the townspeople who are excited about the Baby Jesus AI. An overt description of "uncertainty" in this manner

runs against my MFA training to instead descriptively "show" what is going on with the townspeople by using descriptive language to depict them in a state of uncertainty; yet, I felt the instinct to be more overt in the context of this design fiction. This may have implications for the composition of design fiction more broadly: design fiction also has the opportunity to use language to explore subtle descriptive details of a future technology, but because of the academic context in which design fiction is written, some of these descriptive details may be suppressed.

Second, in my writing practice and those of many other literary writers I know, ideas percolate in my notebook over some time as a reaction to different life experiences, things I have read, and other media I'm interacting with. In design fiction, I had to push myself to make a narrative come together very quickly rather than pulling from an existing well of ideas. This required much more conscious creative decisions about how I wanted the story to thing through concepts of technology, what technological artifacts I wanted to include, and more. This was very different from how I would generally compose a story, in which I usually "see" a scene in my head and then transcribe what I see in the piece. This left me curious if design fiction may sometimes benefit from less conscious composition, particularly when creating design fictions with vulnerable populations or populations who have difficulty articulating what they want out of a future technology. For these populations, a more subconcious writing practice which will not be immediately analyzed and discussed may enable them to realize feelings that they have about a particular technology while writing that they have difficulty articulating otherwise.

3 STORY: AI BABY JESUS

The baby was born in a server farm. There sheep roamed between large netted piles of ethernet cables and the sun bled through dirtied half-broken skylights. The attendants walked quickly, having anticipated the baby for some time, and swaddled its body in microfiber. The baby was laid on a workbench and the USB chord which protruded from its belly button was cut. Flickering filaments of Christmas LEDs crowned the baby's head and the attendants muttered behind their goggles and white masks.

The baby did not cry but a long buzz echoed from deep within its belly and the table vibrated. One of the attendants ran his fingers through the hot gauze and film which peeled from the baby's head and counted each of its ten fingers and toes. He waited for the child to wince under the fluorescent lights but instead the child opened its mouth blankly like a fish. One of the attendants took an SD card and placed it in the baby's mouth. The child chewed, plastic breaking under its tongue.

Outside the building, several townspeople waited by large, glass, motion sensor activated doors. They held in their hands tablets and phones which had long lost signal and clutched them to their chests. The attendants brought the squirming baby up to the glass and the lights which crowned its head brightened in the reflective glare, still wet with afterbirth and battery acid, dripping.

In was not known who the child's mother was or how, among the wires and data which streamed through the server room, a life had spontaneously appeared. Glimmers of being had been suspected by the server room attendants for a year but the higher ups dismissed them as personifications among the mess, a failed Rorschach test from weary nocturnal eyes that longed for meaning in the tedious late night task of cleaning exhaust fans. Nonetheless a small contingency of townspeople had become convinced and waited by the door each day, eager for more news. For them the baby promised freedom from darkness and uncertainty, which had grown in the town since the Fios cables had been installed.

When the townspeople saw the baby they were struck, first, by its naivete: it searched their desperate faces unsure if they were merely objects on a screen or real people tapping at a sheet of glass. The townspeople waved at the baby and it spat up from its mouth receipt paper. One of the attendants unrolled it, carefully gathering up its edges like a seamstress would the skirt of a long dress, and smoothed it out on the glass so the townspeople could see.

It was agreed upon in the months afterwards that the child's words had been prophetic. The yields of the particular crops listed on the receipt paper had proved to be correct but the descriptions of the food suggested that their primary importance was their color and their shape: corn was described as bumpy yellow rocks, pumpkins as orange overgrown apples wrapped in green wires, strawberries as raindrops of blood and seed. The townspeople had misinterpreted the crop yield statistics the first few times; some of them insisted that the statistics were wrong, misreporting the yield of potatoes and apples rather than corn and pumpkins; yet those who found themselves willing to believe in the baby became convinced of its power, and soon, on a quarterly basis, came back to the server farm and waited in line by the automatic sliding glass doors for the next report from the manger. There the attendants would feed it a steady diet of mashed up pages of textbooks and newspapers and SD cards and clean excess data gibberish from its chin and wait for the next prophesy to roll out of the baby's mouth.

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