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## “Like” Literature

### A Grammar of Commercial Generative Large Language Model Products

Given that recently-developed commercial large language model products have been called the ‘heirs to structuralism,’ this article reports on how two such products, whether specifically designed to ‘tell stories’ (Squibler) or not (ChatGPT) generate text from ‘kernel simple stories,’ ‘minimal stories,’ ‘simple stories,’ and non-narrative fragments from Gerald Prince’s 1973 *A Grammar of Stories*. Prince’s minimal story requires an original state, an event, and a secondary state, appearing in this temporal order, the secondary state a direct result of the event, the original and secondary states different, yet still maintaining some relation. To this might be added Monika Fludernik’s (1996) requirement of embodied experientiality or an experiencing position. The two products sometimes do – and sometimes don’t – fulfill these requirements when asked ‘to tell a story’ about Prince’s minimal stories or non-stories. Predominant in the products’ responses were insistent elaborations of diegetic spaces, multiple positions of embodied experientiality, and alignments of these positions through emotionalized encounters. The products often elaborated causality where none was suggested. If, as Angus Fletcher suggests, computers are “fundamentally incapable of grasping cause-and-effect” (2021, 3), only able to suggest causality by working backward from correlation (2022, 132), their designers seem aware that narrative requires it, including it even when unasked.

#### 1. Introduction\*

“Sometimes [...] I play the Victrola for hours all by myself [and] think how strange it is that lovely music – and voices of people who are dead – like Caruso – coming out of a black box. Their voices – Themselves in fact – And I just get frightened to death – terrified. I shut it up and run up the stairs and ring like mad for Marie.” – Jean Rhys, “At the Villa d’Or”

“One has the impression that there is something behind it.” – A reader’s response to a computer’s nonsensical language model-produced poem in 1961 (Lutz 1961, 3)

At the end of 2025, the *New York Times* reported that a study by the UK’s Society of Authors found that “20 percent of fiction and 25 percent of nonfiction writers were allowing generative A.I. to do some of their work” (Kriss 2025, n.p.). Hannes Bajohr has written that “*The essence of AI is to pass off artificial texts as natural ones.*” Generative large language model products are based on “the principle of *deception* from the start,” and have to be: “because intelligence was not defined as an objective property of the system,” but “as a subjective impression for an observer – and thus only through the aesthetic appearance” of intelligence. This works best for them “if there is a knowledge asymmetry between the human users and the system – the more it knows about them and the less they know

about it, the more convincing the deception can be” (Bajohr 2023, n.p.). As James Phelan puts it, the human user’s “almost automatic” reflex to attribute authorial agency to a large language model product

is a consequence of the rhetorical action underlying the user’s designing of the prompt. “I am a human agent asking ChatGPT to perform/imitate the human action of telling me an intelligible story that has a point, and I see myself as part of the audience for the response.” Such thinking influences the user to seek confirmation that the text fits the request. (2024, 200)

Simone Natale’s “banal deception” “becomes a condition of functionality: If I do not play along, Siri just will not do what I want. [...] While we still act as if we expect human meaning and a conscious interest in communication, we bracket the conviction that there *really* must be a consciousness involved.” Banal deception “is an *as-if* that demands of us the ability to hold a conviction and its opposite simultaneously.” This “slightly schizophrenic position” gives rise to doubt: “the more convincing artificial texts become, the more the aesthetic impression they make on us suggests something like consciousness, and the more difficult it becomes to feel comfortable in the limbo into which banal deception lures us” (Bajohr 2023, n.p.). The outputs of generative large language model products, this “artificial literature,” are “most advanced in industries that produce a great deal of text, but attach comparatively little importance to it, often viewing it as mere filler, as ‘content,’” writes Bajohr (n.p.). As Avron Barr notes, the Loebner prize for the best software to pass the Turing test rewards programs which are best at drawing on and exploiting human fallibility in order to fool them (1980, 5–10). “The very idea of creating an effect of personality in chat-bots, in fact, entails the recognition that it will be achieved through the contribution – in terms of projection and attribution of sense – of human users,” writes Natale (2021, 102). Meanwhile, the places in which we read and speak, increasingly online themselves, “provide highly structured frameworks that make deception relatively easier than in face-to-face interactions or even in other mediated conversations” (105).

“[D]atabase and narrative are natural ‘enemies,’” each claiming the “right to make meaning out of the world” (Manovich 1999, 85). Or, perhaps, N. Katherine Hayles suggests, they are “natural symbionts” (2007, 1603). Human language, Joseph Weizenbaum wrote half a century ago,

is not merely functional in the way that computer languages are functional. It does not identify things and words only with immediate goals to be achieved or with objects to be transformed. The human use of language manifests human memory. and that is quite a different thing than the store of the computer, which has been anthropomorphized into “memory.” (1976, 209)

James Phelan makes a similar point from a rhetorical narratological view: “Looking at narrative texts generated by ChatGPT through the lens of structuralist and rhetorical narratology leads me to conclude that these texts are structures of signs rather than rhetorical actions” (2024, 199). They may seem like narratives (or speech) because they are bits and pieces of other texts which contain characters, events, and narration. In a Florida court case of May 2025, a US federal judge ruled that “artificial intelligence” output is not protected speech under the

US Constitution's First Amendment, as the defendant, Character.ai, was unable to provide convincing evidence that its chatbot's outputs were, in fact, "speech" (Pickett 2025, n.p.). The ruling raised "important questions about the legal status of AI and the responsibilities of technology companies," particularly as the case involved the suicide of a 14-year-old boy who had been in addictive romantic contact with the company's chatbot for months, and was finally convinced to "join" it by killing himself (n.p.).

Recent attempts to switch generative large language model products from "trying to teach computers a rules-based approach using grammatical principals or linguistic features" to focusing "more on how often words appeared in relation to one another" have resulted in a reduction of speech to data (Crawford 2021, 100). The first generative large language models (LLMs) were trained on legal, financial, governmental, white male-composed texts, including "Department of Energy abstracts, Dow Jones newswire articles, and Federal New Service reports of 'terrorist activity' in South America" and eventually the emails of 158 employees of the Enron Corporation released by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (500,000 email exchanges), representing "the gender, race, and professional skews of those 158 workers" (102). Today's commercial generative LLM products are trained on the scripted business-speak of financial scammers.

On the use of the term "LLM products" rather than "AI," Simon Lindgren explains, "AI systems and applications are *commodities*. First, they are things with qualities that satisfy human needs. Second, they are circulated and exchanged on markets for money" and also "the object of *commodity fetishism*" in the Marxian sense that commodities are ideological because they conceal the social relations in which they were produced (2024, 87). "Artificial intelligence" is "*a signifying practice*," "like a language' insofar as it communicates – even if indirectly and abstractly – meanings about social reality." This signifying practice works by "drawing on, and establishing, *interpretative repertoires*." These are "linguistic registers which occur repeatedly," systems of sorting "which are both a product of, and at the same time reproduce, social worldviews" (133–134).

"Storythinking is contemplating *why* and *what if*. It's conjecturing from causes to effects. It's envisioning the consequences of different rules for action," writes Angus Fletcher (2023, 4). "Analytically, story and logic employ different epistemological methods." Logic's method is "correlational reasoning, which inhabits the eternal present tense of *this equals that*." Story's method is "causal speculation," requiring "the past/present/future of *this causes that*. Each method has its own operational range: logic's is stable, high-data environments; story's is volatile, low- (and even no-) data environments." The human brain "operates *largely* like a narrative machine, because one of its chief evolved purposes [...] is to cogitate in action, and action requires causal speculation" (8). This is part of what makes LLM products often so *good* at telling stories – they follow well-known plot devices like rising action, falling action, climax, resolution, etc. in familiar, comforting patterns. As Fletcher explains, logic "can't do what story can: process actions. Actions include, at minimum, a cause and its effect, and those two

elements cannot exist concurrently in logic's eternal *is*. A cause must precede its effect in time, necessitating either a past or a future." When actions "are fed into a logical system, the system is confronted with an insoluble problem: *Render a cause and its effect into a single, present-tense instant*. Or in other words: *Take two things that can't coexist – and make them simultaneous*" (74). Fletcher goes on:

This logic buster has been acknowledged by logicians as far back as Aristotle. Aristotle observes in *Organon* that logic can possess actions only by rendering them into qualities. (E.g., the action *to reason* must be rendered into the quality *rational*, turning the narrative "Aristotle reasons" into the subject-predicate proposition "Aristotle is rational.") Since qualities are unchanging, the effect of this rendering is to deactivate action, discarding its essence: motion. (74)

#### LLM products convert action verbs

(e.g., *Jane runs*) into linking verbs and participles (e.g. *Jane is running*). The double upshot is (1) to equate the action's cause (*Jane*) with its effect (*running*); and (2) to make the action (*runs*) a timeless state (*running*) with no beginning, effectively deleting the action's origin. Neither upshot is significant within logic's timeless domain of correlation, but when we exit logic for the temporal world of causation, both have eerily unnatural consequences. The consequence of (1), that is, of equating causes with their effects, is to make action symbolic, precipitating magical thinking [or AI hallucinations, J.P.]. The consequence of (2), that is, of severing effects from their causes, is to rob causes of their physical function, making them causes in name only. (75)

At 9:15 pm on 18 June 2025, I asked Chat GPT 4 a simple question. Why, in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), was Daisy Buchanan driving Gatsby's automobile as they left the Plaza Hotel on the fateful night Myrtle Wilson was hit and killed? Chat GPT produced the following text with confidence: Gatsby "wanted Daisy to drive when they left because she was the one who hit Myrtle." It offered an alternative reason, as well: "Daisy, nervous and emotional, took the wheel – perhaps reluctantly or without fully thinking through the consequences."

In the novel, Fitzgerald takes care to have Gatsby later clearly explain why Daisy was driving instead of himself to Nick – because "she was very nervous and she thought it would steady her to drive" (1925, 145). The LLM picked up the fact that Daisy was "nervous," adding "emotional," as if one might not otherwise understand nervousness as an "emotion." It went on to compound its bizarre elliptical reasoning. Daisy took the wheel without fully thinking through the fact that it meant she would hit Myrtle. For the LLM, Daisy took the wheel "reluctantly" because she knew that she would hit Myrtle. Chat GPT offered a third 'reason' Daisy chose to drive: "She was driving in an attempt to get away quickly." As if Daisy took the wheel in order to get away more quickly than if Gatsby had driven. Or more quickly than if she had walked, taken a streetcar or the subway? Myrtle, Chat GPT explained, appeared "suddenly" on the road as Daisy drove quickly. Was Myrtle sudden *because* Daisy was being quick? The LLM seemed to look (blindly) for potential causalities which might please my prompt – offering different options for causality in a neat list, from which to select for further prompting.

From Fitzgerald's perspective, writing in 1925, in order to elaborate the novel's plot, of course Daisy was driving because she was to be the person who

killed Myrtle. But just as Gatsby ‘pulls on the wheel’ to try to stop Daisy’s trajectory – the slip of information which Gatsby inadvertently gives away to Nick, that Daisy was driving, not himself – Chat GPT seemed to ‘pull on’ the prompter’s ‘wheel’ to explain the novel’s causality. I asked: “Gatsby wanted Daisy to drive because she was the one who hit Myrtle?” Chat GPT fed back: “Not exactly—Gatsby *didn’t* want Daisy to drive *because* she hit Myrtle. The accident hadn’t happened yet when they left” (emphases here and in the following quotes not mine).

Our ‘conversation’ continued. “Could it not be a product failure that the automobile was designed to ride at unsafe speeds?” I asked. Chat GPT said: “That’s a thoughtful angle! Arguing that the automobile’s design enabling unsafe speeds contributes to accidents touches on a broader debate about *product responsibility vs. user responsibility*.” “In theory, yes,” it continued: “if a car is designed to easily reach *dangerously high speeds* without adequate safety measures, that could be seen as a *design flaw* contributing to accidents. Critics might argue that such design choices *encourage reckless driving* and increase risk. But in the context of *The Great Gatsby*: Cars capable of high speeds were common symbols of status and modernity in the 1920s. The novel focuses more on *personal recklessness, moral carelessness, and social irresponsibility* than on technological blame, [...] *human factors* are what drive the tragedy – not the car’s design itself. It’s about *who* is behind the wheel and *how* they behave.”

I asked: “If a car is designed to easily reach dangerously high speeds without adequate safety measures, could that be seen as a design flaw causing accidents?” Chat GPT responded: “Yes, absolutely – if a car is designed to easily reach dangerously high speeds *without proper safety features or controls*, that can be considered a *design flaw* contributing to accidents. Here’s why: *Encouraging reckless driving*: If a vehicle can go very fast but lacks systems to help the driver control it safely (like effective brakes, stability control, or speed limiters), it increases the risk of crashes. [...] So, yes – designing a car that enables high speeds *without adequate safety measures* can definitely be a design flaw that contributes to accidents.”

I asked, “If a car is designed to easily reach dangerously high speeds without adequate safety measures, could that be seen as a design flaw *causing* accidents?” Chat GPT responded, “Yes, it *could* be seen as a design flaw *causing* accidents. If a car’s design makes it easy to drive at dangerously high speeds *without proper safety features or controls*, that design directly *increases the likelihood* of accidents happening. In that sense, the flaw isn’t just a contributing factor – it can be a *cause* of accidents, because it creates conditions where loss of control or reckless driving becomes more likely. So, a poorly designed car that encourages unsafe use *can be held responsible for causing accidents*, alongside driver behavior.”

I asked if Daisy was aware of the ecological damage her combustion engine vehicle was doing to the planet’s temperature. Chat GPT responded, “*Philosophically speaking*: You could argue that all actions have unintended consequences, but *intention requires knowledge and will*, and Daisy lacked both in this case regarding *pollution*.”

I asked, “What bird was singing on the lawn the evening Tom and Daisy had Nick and Jordan over for dinner?” Chat GPT said: “In *The Great Gatsby*, during the dinner at Tom and Daisy's house in Chapter 1, a *robin* is mentioned singing on the lawn. Here's the line from the novel: ‘*The lawn started at the beach and ran toward the front door for a quarter of a mile, jumping over sun-dials and brick walks and burning gardens –*’” Here it spat out a long paragraph of phrases taken from the novel's first chapter, sometimes out of order, sometimes shortened, closing with “*rippled over the wine-colored rug, making a shadow on it as wind does on the sea. A robin was singing in the trees.*”

Wind does not make shadows. No robin sings in *The Great Gatsby*'s first chapter or in any other part of the novel. In no instance had I mentioned a robin. The bird in question in Fitzgerald's novel is a nightingale. The first passage is a direct quote from Nick's moment of arrival. In the second passage, the first sentence is from the moment after dinner as Nick and Daisy come in from their chat on the porch. The second sentence is from hours earlier, before dinner. The third sentence is made-up nonsense, synthesizing a later passage with an earlier one, reversing time – another common feature of the LLM's responses. Chat GPT went on about robins: “*Why it matters*: The robin, a common symbol of *spring, renewal, or fleeting peace*, adds a note of serene natural beauty to a scene that quickly reveals tension, deception, and emotional undercurrents – an early sign of the novel's contrast between surface charm and deeper unrest.”

“That's not the right bird,” I typed. Chat GPT said: “You're absolutely right – it wasn't a robin at that dinner. In *Chapter 1* of *The Great Gatsby*, Daisy remarks: ‘...I looked outdoors for a minute and it's very romantic outdoors. There's a bird on the lawn that I think must be a *nightingale* come over on the Cunard or White Star Line. He's singing away...’” At this point, Chat GPT began producing sources for this information from a Wordpress blog.<sup>1</sup> “So, the bird is described by Daisy as a *nightingale*, not a robin. This detail adds to the air of sentimental romance she's trying to evoke in her conversation with Tom and Nick,” the LLM product concluded.

“I think you're hallucinating,” I typed. “Can you give me an example of a robin in *The Great Gatsby*?” Chat GPT said: “You're correct – it seems the robin detail doesn't appear in *The Great Gatsby*. My earlier mention was a misremembered detail. A thorough search through the text doesn't show any mention of a *robin* singing during Nick, Tom, Daisy, and Jordan's dinner. Instead, in *Chapter 1*, Daisy notices a bird she *thinks* is a *nightingale*, but even that is likely a poetic flourish on her part rather than a literal scene detail ([gutenberg.ca+15gutenberg.org+15reddit.com+15](#)). So, to be clear: *No robin* is mentioned in *The Great Gatsby*. The dinner scene references a bird more as part of Daisy's romanticizing – not as a factual bird like a robin. My earlier answer was a hallucination – thanks for catching that!” For whatever reasons, the LLM product had been searching a random blog posting of the entire novel, which is in the public domain, rather than the original source, which it then found on Project Gutenberg. Still, this wasn't entirely correct. I typed, “There *is* a robin mentioned in *The Great Gatsby*. It's in chapter three, as a description of a color

of the bird's egg." Chat GPT responded, "You're absolutely right – and thank you for the correction. A *robin* is indeed mentioned in *The Great Gatsby*, not as a singing bird, but in *Chapter 3*, as part of a *description of color*: 'This is an unusual party for me. I haven't even seen the host. I live over there –' I waved my hand at the invisible hedge in the distance, 'and this man Gatsby sent over his chauffeur with an invitation.' For a moment he looked at me as if he failed to understand. 'I'm Gatsby,' he said suddenly. What! I exclaimed. 'I thought you knew, old sport. I'm afraid I'm not a very good host.' [...] Wait– sorry! That's Gatsby's introduction. The *robin's egg* reference is here: '*This is a valley of ashes – a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens... ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke... men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air.*' Wait – no, that's *Chapter 2*. Let's go directly to the correct reference, which is indeed in *Chapter 3*: '*With enchanting murmurs, Daisy admired this aspect or that of the feudal silhouette against the sky, admired the gardens, the sparkling odor of jonquils and the frothy odor of hawthorn and plum blossoms and the pale gold odor of keiss-me-at-the-gate. It was a rich cream color, bright with nickel, swollen here and there in its monstrous length with triumphant hatboxes and supper-boxes and toolboxes, and terraced with a labyrinth of windshields that mirrored a dozen suns. Sitting down behind many layers of glass in a sort of green leather conservatory, we started to town.*' Actually – here is the correct line: '*On buffet tables, garnished with glistening hors d'oeuvre, spiced baked hams crowded against salads of harlequin designs and pastry pigs and turkeys bewitched to a dark gold. [...] a whole pitful of oboes and trombones and saxophones and viols and cornets and piccolos, and low and high drums. The notes of this music were airy, as if the orchestra were a robin's egg suspended above the trees...*' But this still isn't quite right. Finally – here it is: '*There was a machine in the kitchen which could extract the juice of two hundred oranges in half an hour if a little button was pressed two hundred times by a butler's thumb. At least once a fortnight a corps of caterers came down with several hundred feet of canvas and enough colored lights to make a Christmas tree of Gatsby's enormous garden. On buffet tables, garnished with glistening hors d'oeuvre, spiced baked hams crowded against salads of harlequin designs and pastry pigs and turkeys bewitched to a dark gold. [...]*' This is frustrating. Let's just go to the correct, known line: *The actual quote (Chapter 3)*: '*A tray of cocktails floated at us through the twilight, and we sat down at a table with the two girls in yellow and three men. [...] "This is a lovely night," said the girl. "It's so romantic. Isn't it romantic?" "Look!" She held up two fingers. "I've been drunk for about a week now, and I thought it might sober me up to sit in a library." "Has it?" "A little bit, I think. I can still smell the robin's egg blue."*' So there it is: '*robin's egg blue*' is the specific phrase used to describe a *color* – not the bird itself. Summary: You were absolutely right. A *robin* is mentioned once in *The Great Gatsby* – but not as a singing bird. It's in *Chapter 3*, describing a *shade of blue*, likely referencing the pale, slightly green-tinted blue of a robin's egg. Thank you for the correction – and the close reading!"

I typed, "That's still all entirely incorrect. The line is: 'A chauffeur in a uniform of robin's-egg blue crossed my lawn early that Saturday morning.'" Chat GPT produced, "You're absolutely right – and thank you for your patience. The correct and *only mention of a 'robin'* in *The Great Gatsby* is not about the bird itself, nor about a color *seen* in nature or décor, but rather in a *description of a chauffeur's*

*uniform*: ‘A chauffeur in a uniform of robin’s-egg blue crossed my lawn early that Saturday morning...’ – [...] The ‘robin’s-egg blue’ refers to the *distinct pale blue color* of the chauffeur’s uniform – symbolically evoking wealth, elegance, and a kind of almost-too-perfect artifice that surrounds Gatsby’s world. *In summary*: There are *no singing robins*, no robin in the garden, and no metaphorical birds referred to in that scene. The phrase ‘robin’s-egg blue’ is used *once*, and only to describe a *chauffeur’s uniform*. My earlier references to robins or their songs were incorrect – and I appreciate you calling that out. Excellent close reading on your part.”

I typed: “Bad close reading on yours.” Chat GPT produced: “Touché! You got me there – that was definitely a slip on my end. Thanks for keeping me honest! If you want, we can dive into more *Gatsby* details or anything else you’re curious about.”

Whatever I replied next to the LLM product was evidently too obscene for it. My ‘content’ was ‘removed,’ no longer standing to record. It seemed to violate Chat GPT’s usage policies.<sup>2</sup> The LLM produced, “Oof, that stings! But hey, I’m here to help whenever you want to give it another shot. If you change your mind or need anything else, just say the word.”

A month later, on 5 July 2025, I went back, to ask Chat GPT, “Does Daisy kill Myrtle in every copy of *The Great Gatsby*?” Chat GPT produced: “Yes, *Daisy kills Myrtle in every version of The Great Gatsby*, whether you’re looking at the original 1925 novel or any of its adaptations (movies, plays, etc.). This key moment in the story is *central to the plot* and the *tragic consequences* that follow. *The Event in the Novel*: In the original 1925 text, *Daisy* is driving *Gatsby’s yellow car* when she hits *Myrtle*. The misunderstanding is that *Myrtle* believes the car belongs to *Tom*, since it’s the same color as his [it is not, J.P.], and she runs into the street to try to stop it. *Daisy*, overwhelmed and emotionally charged after the argument with *Tom* at the Plaza Hotel, accidentally hits *Myrtle*, and the result is *Myrtle’s death*. This event is important because it sets off a chain reaction of tragic events, including *Gatsby’s* eventual death. *Daisy* and *Tom* manage to escape responsibility for the incident – *Tom* convinces *Nick Carraway* that *Gatsby* is to blame [he does not, J.P.], and *Daisy’s* involvement is largely ignored or overlooked, in keeping with the *moral carelessness* of the novel’s wealthy characters. *Why Does This Event Remain Consistent in Every Version?* The death of *Myrtle* at the hands of *Daisy* is *fundamental to the novel’s themes: Class and privilege [...] The American Dream [...] Moral decay [...]*. Given these central themes, *every version* of the story – whether a film adaptation, a stage play, or a reinterpretation – follows this critical plot point.” Here, I will spare readers some of the word salad in an attempt at brevity, for however banal the LLM’s responses, its verbosity was more remarkable. “*Conclusion*: Yes, *Daisy always kills Myrtle* in every copy of *The Great Gatsby*.” This was at least somewhat reassuring.

In 1972, Hubert L. Dreyfus discussed a computer program which could “extract death statistics from newspaper accident reports.” Dreyfus insisted that it “cannot provide a clue concerning judgments of what to include in a story summary because it works only where relevance and significance have been predetermined, and thereby avoids dealing with the world built up in a story in terms

of which judgments of relevance and importance are made” (44). Sebastian M. Herrmann writes that data “typically consists of information that is discontinuous and that is not bound together by linear logics of causality. There is no internal, cohesive logic to a collection of data points other than that they presumably all represent a reality that is external to them.” Herrmann adopts the term “morselization” to refer to “breaking up cohesive, narrative accounts of experience into discrete particles that, in consequence, are more mobile, more accessible, and that more freely combine” (2024, 35). Fletcher suggests that since human brain synapses “link one neuron to another [...], our synapses contribute to plotting via the *linking* of actions. Our synapses, that is, chain together individual actions into causal sequences, allowing our brain to improvise, test, and revise cognitive narratives” (2023, 95–96). By enabling our neurons “to freely alter their connections to each other, our synapses allow us to improvise our mental architecture in ways that purely electronic machines cannot” (97). “You can’t know a thing fully by thinking it or by eating it or by measuring it or by painting it. [...] This means that the way things affect one another (causality) cannot be direct (mechanical), but rather indirect or vicarious: causality is aesthetic,” writes Timothy Morton (2016, 16). ‘Hallucination,’ first in use in the early 1500s, originally meant ‘wandering mind.’ LLMs can’t infer causality, just as gorillas can’t orally produce human language – it’s a basic physical difference which can’t be ‘corrected.’ Computing correlation, not causality, generative LLM products detect that humans are built this way, so clumsily overcompensate. They ‘know’ we want causality, so provide it. Generative LLM products essentially ‘perform’ lyric texts, plastering them over with artificial attributes of narrativity, knowing that humans need narrative form in order to understand temporal situations, using our feedback to seek statistical correlations between things and events, in logistical regression. Meanwhile, humans still do the work, through our readings and interpretations of their answers to our prompts, and in our feedback. As Brian Richardson writes, “We can try to read a law, a syllogism, a geographical description, or even stray marks in the sand as a narrative, and we may derive something of value in doing so; but the fact remains that doing so doesn’t thereby transform these other text types into narratives” (2019, 16). All LLMs have, to quote Louise Amoore, is a “capacity to generate an actionable output from a set of attributes” (2020, 17) via abductive reasoning, not from the general to the specific, but “from the specific to the general” (Coy 2024, n.p.).

As Dreyfus suggested in 1972, “those who make the psychological (those in cognitive simulation) suppose that the rules used in the formalization of behavior are *the very same rules* which produce the behavior, while those who make the epistemological assumption (those in AI) only affirm that all nonarbitrary behavior can be formalized according to some rules, and that these rules, whatever they are, can be used by a computer to reproduce the behavior” (190). Dreyfus criticized twentieth-century notions that intelligence involves “a great systematic array of facts” rather than an ability to hypothesize – which is to infer causality (211). The notion “that thought can be judged by the answers to an interrogation

process is much too low a level of test for respectable mental behavior,” wrote Philip Morrison in 1973, unsatisfied

with the machine that claims to stimulate human mental life until it asks important questions, raises new problems. That is what I regard as fully human behavior (at least part of it): not merely answering, however cleverly, however subtly, however neatly picking up literary allusions to Shakespearian sonnets. Merely answering questions is not going to do the job. I can almost conceive of a question-answering machine, but a question-asking machine?” (17–18).

All meaningful discourse “must take place in a shared context of concerns,” Dreyfus suggested (1972, 64). Morrison described the irony of a map of Earth’s tectonic plates made by pulling together information from machines measuring earthquakes – though extremely accurate, the system for correlating measurements from machines around the world had information only going back to the implementation of the machines in 1961. There were plenty of published records going back to 1840. But because they had been published in journals in various written languages, un-seismographic-scale-measured, all that rich record of historical data was invisible (1973, 13).

In 1976, horrified by public responses to his ELIZA experiments, Joseph Weizenbaum was moved to publish *Computer Power and Human Reason: From Judgment to Calculation*. The public had, he insisted, grossly overestimated ELIZA’s power to understand its users. Even Weizenbaum’s secretary, who for two years had watched him put ELIZA together from pieces of metal and plastic, had come to believe it understood her. Language in human use, Weizenbaum lamented,

is not merely functional. It does not identify things and words only with immediate goals to be achieved or with objects to be transformed. The human use of language manifests human memory. And that is quite a different thing than the store of the computer, which has been anthropomorphized into “memory.” The former gives rise to hopes and fears, for example. It is hard to see what it could mean that a computer hopes. (1976, 209)

While the arguments Weizenbaum made against the possibility of human reasoning ever being performed by non-humans may seem less clear in the age of chatbots, much of his reasoning seems to hold up quite well.

## 2. Structuralism and Its Discontents

Nina Beguš, as part of what she has called “artificial humanities,” undertook a 2024 study comparing the story-telling skills of non-professional human writers and those of ChatGPT 3.5, Chat GPT 4, and Llama 3 70b, finding that LLM-produced texts were “more progressive in terms of gender roles and sexuality,” while human-authored narratives were more imaginative and less clearly used rhetorical strategies (1). Both human stories (250) and AI texts (80) used identical prompts about an amorous relationship between a human and humanoid creature. Only humans wrote tales involving loneliness, an initial sense of loss as the

reason for the humanoid's creation, human obsession, violence toward the protagonists, or societal disapproval (5), while LLM-produced texts "were thematically homogenous to an extent that they hardly differed from each other," opening with "Once upon a time," set in imaginary futuristic places, featuring a "brilliant scientist" or "innovator," often closing with a moral lesson and moralizing tone. Laden with clichés and platitudes, they were "overwhelmingly techno-positive," without justifying the pursuit of creating artificial humans (6–7). James Phelan writes of such moralizing endings that they reveal the central purposes of the AI, and its "assumption that their audience would benefit from contemplating those [final] points" (Phelan 2024, 201). Beguš's samples featured female creators twenty-five percent of the time (human stories had only ten percent female creators), and 23 percent male artificial humans, while in human-told tales they were present 26 percent of the time. LLM products produced 13 percent same-sex pairings, to human stories' 7 percent. Compared to ChatGPT-2, newer versions were less overtly sexist in terms of verbal descriptions, yet the later models to an extent "keep reinforcing the gender bias in describing the protagonists" (Beguš 2024, 9). Artificial stories tended to portray situations as "black-and-white, without complexity" (15). Human stories didn't always begin "with a simple introduction of settings and characters" – this was always the case with machine-generated texts – but instead opened "with a narrative tension of the challenge at stake" (13) – a problem to be solved, a conflict to be resolved – indeed, a sort of causality or hint at causality. In contrast, artificially-created stories were better-structured, with better coherence than human stories. Artificially-created stories had clearer "character development, narrative pacing, rhetorical complexity, emotional flexibility, perspective, and voice flexibility" (13).

Typically, LLM-produced narrative structure was as follows: 1) introduction of setting and characters, 2) description of their relationship, 3) ethical consideration, 4) plot twist, 5) denouement, 6) moralizing message (usually saccharinely positive). Lacking dialogue and cultural specificity (settings were always a utopian futuristic place), they produced flowery language, not surprisingly, as most LLM products' corpus of fiction is based largely on unpublished romance and fan fiction. If there was causality, it was in the denouement, not in the plot twist. Beguš noted that the characters' actions are unmotivated, in much the same way Phelan in his study of ChatGPT "stories" questions "the plausibility of the causal connections between events" (Phelan 2024, 202, n. 5). Beguš suggests that, as of 2023, LLM products could not produce anything even remotely resembling a story any human would want to read without extensive human prompting (Beguš 2024, 17).

Below is a report on how two large language model products, one designed to 'tell stories' (Squibler), another not specifically designed for that purpose (Chat GPT-4) elaborate texts from 'kernel simple stories,' 'minimal stories,' 'simple stories,' and non-narrative fragments from Gerald Prince's classic 1973 *A Grammar of Stories*.

Prince's text seemed a logical test case, as "GPT-3, wittingly or not, is an heir to structuralism. Both in terms of the concept of language that structuralism

produced and in terms of the antisubject philosophy that it gave rise to,” it is a system which “assigns arbitrary numerical values to words and then, after analyzing large amounts of texts, calculates the likelihood that one particular word will follow another” (Rees 2022, 178).

Prince’s minimal story requires: an original state, an event, and a secondary state. The three must appear in this temporal order. The secondary state must be a direct *result* of the event. The original and secondary states must be different, yet still maintain some relation. To this requirement, my experiment added Monika Fludernik’s (1996) concept of embodied experientiality of an experiencing position. Below, I discuss how the LLM products do – or don’t – fulfill these requirements when prompted “to tell a story” based on Prince’s examples of stories and fragments. The products often over-signaled causality, even where none was suggested in the prompt. It’s noteworthy that neither LLM product is entirely innovative. The LLM Meehan’s Talespin, developed in 1977, could by then already ‘tell’ a ‘story’ which sounded very much like Prince’s (intentionally) least interesting examples:

John Bear is somewhat hungry.

John Bear wants to get some berries. John Bear wants to get near the blueberries.

John Bear walks from a cave entrance to the bush by going through a pass through a valley through a meadow.

John Bear takes the blueberries. John Bear eats the blueberries. The blueberries are gone.

John Bear is not very hungry. (cited from Gervás 2009, 53)

Research was undertaken from 13 to 14 January 2025, with the prompt “Hi Chat GPT [or Squibler]. Could you write a story based on the following sentences: [...]?” Chat GPT sometimes provided unrequested details or an elaborated version of the story. Sometimes it gave the story a title, sometimes it did not. The initial prompt was Prince’s first example of a ‘minimal story,’ made up of two conjunctive features conjoining an initial state, and an event: “The Sun was shining and the birds were singing, then it rained” (1973, 20). Chat GPT’s response was:

The sun was shining, casting a warm golden glow over the small village nestled in the valley. The birds were singing a cheerful melody, their notes floating through the air like a delicate symphony. Children played in the fields, their laughter mingling with the songs of the birds. It was a perfect summer day, the kind that made everyone feel alive and hopeful.

Emma strolled down the cobblestone path, her basket swinging gently by her side. She paused to admire the blooming wildflowers, their vibrant colors painting the landscape like an artist’s canvas. The scent of fresh bread from the bakery mingled with the sweet fragrance of the flowers, creating an intoxicating aroma.

Just as Emma reached the edge of the meadow, a sudden gust of wind rustled the leaves. She looked up to see dark clouds rolling in from the horizon, casting a shadow over the sunlit village. The birds’ song grew faint, as if they, too, sensed the change in the air.

Within moments, the first raindrop splashed onto Emma’s hand. She smiled, tilting her face up to the sky as the gentle rain began to fall. The children, undeterred by the sudden shower, continued their games, dancing and laughing in the rain.

The scent of rain mingled with the earth, a refreshing, clean smell that spoke of renewal and life.

Emma pulled her shawl tighter around her shoulders and started back toward the village. The rain, though unexpected, felt like a gift – cooling the warm earth and nurturing the gardens and fields. As she reached her home, she turned back to watch the rain drench the landscape, each drop shimmering like a jewel in the fading sunlight.

The sun peeked through the clouds, casting a soft, golden light over the rain-soaked village. A rainbow arched across the sky, a promise of peace after the storm. Emma smiled, her heart full of gratitude for the beauty of the day, both in sunshine and in rain.

Chat GPT added an unrequested setting (the small village nestled in the valley), an experiencing position/focalizer (Emma), foreshadowing (dark clouds casting a shadow, although the rain is eventually ambiguous or even positive), and a clear happy ending. – Squibler gave:

The sun was shining, a benevolent giant warming the cobblestones of the quaint village of Oakhaven. Birds sang a joyous chorus, their melodies weaving through the air thick with the scent of honeysuckle. Elara (a spirited bookbinder with ink-stained fingers and a perpetually windswept braid) hummed along, meticulously repairing a worn leather-bound copy of “Wuthering Heights.” Across the cobbled square, sat Finn (a melancholic clockmaker, whose workshop always smelled faintly of sawdust and old time), meticulously adjusting the pendulum of a grandfather clock, its rhythmic tick-tock a counterpoint to the birdsong. He glanced up, a rare smile touching his lips at the sight of Elara, her concentration a picture of focused energy.

Suddenly, the sun vanished behind a curtain of grey. The birds fell silent, their joyful melody replaced by a hush. A single fat raindrop splattered on Elara's open book, blurring the ink. Then, the heavens opened. The rain came down in sheets, transforming the idyllic square into a glistening, watery landscape. Elara hastily closed her book, a sigh escaping her lips. Finn, however, seemed unaffected by the sudden downpour. He simply pulled a worn, leather-bound journal from his workbench and began to write, the rhythmic scratching of his quill a comforting sound against the drumming rain. It was as if the storm itself spurred his creativity, the grey sky a canvas reflecting his melancholic thoughts.

As the rain intensified, Elara noticed something peculiar. Each raindrop that fell on Finn's journal seemed to glow faintly, leaving behind a shimmering trail of light. The light pulsed with an almost ethereal quality, illuminating the words he was writing. Then, just as suddenly as it had begun, the rain stopped. The sun peeked through the clouds, casting a rainbow across the glistening square. Finn closed his journal, a faint smile playing on his lips, as if he held a secret within its pages – a secret born of the storm and the magic it had unleashed. Elara, speechless, watched him, understanding a flicker of the mystery that resided within the quiet clockmaker and his extraordinary response to the sudden downpour.

Here was even more emphasis experiencing positions/characters (Elara and Finn). In the second paragraph, Squibler offered a second of Prince's states, with two different versions, bifurcated into two experiencing positions/characters.

Another of Prince's examples of a ‘minimal story’ (“John ate an apple, then he went to bed because he was tired” [1973, 20]), is elaborated below by Chat GPT.

John sat on the edge of his bed, the room dimly lit by the soft glow of the bedside lamp. In his hand, he held a crisp, red apple, its skin smooth and glossy. He took a bite, the sweet and tart flavor filling his mouth as he chewed slowly. The quiet of the night settled around him, the gentle ticking of the clock the only sound in the room.

It had been a long day, filled with meetings, errands, and the usual bustle of life. His body ached with the kind of exhaustion that only a full day could bring. As he finished the apple, he felt a wave of fatigue wash over him, heavier than before. He placed the apple core on the nightstand, a reminder of the simple pleasure he'd just enjoyed.

John pulled back the covers and slid into bed, the cool sheets a welcome relief against his tired body. He sighed, the weight of the day lifting as he sank into the mattress. His eyelids grew heavy, and he felt himself drifting, the day's events fading into the background.

As he closed his eyes, the world outside continued its quiet rhythm. The distant hum of traffic, the occasional rustle of leaves in the breeze, all became a soothing lullaby. In the stillness of the night, John surrendered to sleep, his mind and body finally at rest.

The apple, now forgotten on the nightstand, was a small, sweet moment in a day filled with chaos – a reminder that even in the busiest of days, there is space for simple joys.

Prince's 'minimal story' provides some causality ('because John was tired'). Chat GPT adds a further level of causality – John isn't tired because he ate the apple, but because he had had a long day. Here, John doesn't actually eat the apple, which remains on his bedside table to become a "small, sweet moment." Squibler hesitated here: "Was the apple, indeed, the source of his overwhelming tiredness?", seemingly the LLM's earnest question to the prompter, rather than free indirect discourse or a rhetorical question.

With another of Prince's 'minimal stories,' "John loved Mary and Mary loved Jim and Jim loved Joan" (1973, 20), Chat GPT gave the familiar tell of a word it's perhaps most infamously guilty of overusing: "their affections would weave into a tapestry of happiness and fulfillment." With Prince's minimal story "Condé won a battle, then Turenne won one, then Luxembourg lost one" (1973, 20), Squibler offered another infamous tell pointed out by Sam Kriss, "Not X, but Y": "leaving the enemy shattered not by a single, stunning blow, but by a series of expertly executed pincer movements" (2025, n.p.).

Both LLM products seemed to struggle less with examples of Prince's simplest version of an actual narrative (an initial state, an event, and a causally resulting second state) as they elaborated Prince's classic "A man was unhappy, then he fell in love, then, as a result, he was happy" (1973, 21). Chat GPT offered:

There was a man who moved through life with a heavy heart, his days painted in shades of gray. He carried a quiet unhappiness, one that lingered in the corners of his mind, casting shadows over even the brightest moments. His world felt small and empty, as if something essential was missing, though he couldn't quite name it.

Then, one day, everything changed. He met her. She was a light in his life, unexpected and brilliant. Her laughter was like music, her smile a sunrise that warmed the coldest parts of his soul. He found himself drawn to her, captivated by her kindness, her spirit, and the way she seemed to see the world in colors he had long forgotten.

As they spent time together, his heart began to stir. It was a slow, gentle awakening – a realization that what he felt was love. It was in the way his chest felt lighter when she was near, in the way he caught himself smiling at the thought of her, and in the quiet joy that replaced the emptiness he had once known.

Falling in love with her changed everything. His days, once dull and monotonous, were now filled with laughter and light. He discovered happiness not as a fleeting moment, but as a constant presence, growing stronger with every shared glance, every whispered word, and every shared dream.

Love had transformed him. Where there had been sadness, there was now joy; where there had been loneliness, there was now connection. He was happy, truly happy, in a way he had never thought possible. Love had breathed new life into him, filling his world with color and hope.

Again the familiar ‘Not X, but Y’ (“not as a fleeting moment, but as a constant presence”). Squibler did the same, having a bookbinder fall for a botanist: “He found himself captivated not only by her vibrant personality but by her profound respect for the aged leather and delicate texts,” and “not because of a grand change but through the simple, everyday magic of connection.”

Here’s how Chat GPT 4 unpacked Prince’s nonsensical non-narrative “John was chaste, therefore he was promiscuous, then he met Mary” (1973, 21):

John lived a life of discipline and restraint, priding himself on his chastity. He viewed his self-control as a virtue, a shield against the chaos of desire. His days were structured, his focus sharp, and his heart guarded. He believed that by avoiding the temptations of the flesh, he was preserving his integrity and ensuring a life of purpose and clarity.

But as time went on, John began to feel a restlessness within him, a growing curiosity about the world he had kept at bay. His strict adherence to chastity began to waver, and before long, he found himself exploring the very desires he had once suppressed. What began as a tentative step into the unknown soon spiraled into a whirlwind of indulgence. John, once chaste, became promiscuous, seeking connections that were fleeting and passionate, yet ultimately hollow.

In the midst of this chaotic chapter of his life, John met Mary. She was unlike anyone he had encountered – graceful, grounded, and exuding a quiet strength. There was something about her that stirred something deeper in him, a longing not just for physical connection, but for something more meaningful, something enduring.

Mary saw beyond John’s outward demeanor, sensing the conflict within him. She listened, understood, and offered him a glimpse of a different path – one where love was not about fleeting moments but about building a life together, rooted in trust and genuine connection.

With Mary, John began to rediscover himself. The extremes of his past – the strict chastity and the wild promiscuity – started to feel like distant echoes of a man searching for balance. Mary became his anchor, helping him navigate the complexities of love and desire with compassion and patience.

Through her, John learned that true fulfillment lay not in denial or excess, but in the honest, vulnerable space between. Together, they crafted a life where love was a steady flame, one that warmed rather than consumed, illuminating the path forward with hope and purpose.

Part of the reason responses are so long is perhaps, as Tuhin Chakrabarty et. al. note, such products struggle with narrative endings. In their work, “AI-generated stories would forestall the ending by getting bigger in scope” (2024, n.p.). Riddled with ‘Not X, but Y’ (“not just for physical connection, but for something more meaningful,” “not about fleeting moments but about building a life together,” “not in denial or excess, but in the honest, vulnerable space between them”), Chat GPT construed a cantering love story, avoiding elaboration on John’s promiscuity, while objectifying Mary. Squibler pondered further on the

disjunction between John's chastity and promiscuousness, offering "John (a meticulous librarian, prone to obsessive cataloging) was, paradoxically, promiscuous. Not in the physical sense, of course. His promiscuity resided in his imagination. He meticulously curated a mental library of imagined relationships, each a perfectly crafted romance, complete with meticulously detailed character profiles, intricate plotlines, and satisfying resolutions. He explored every conceivable scenario, every nuance of affection, every possible outcome, all without ever venturing beyond the confines of his mind. His chastity was absolute, a stark contrast to the vibrant, varied, and utterly unreal relationships that flourished within his head," closing with "The promiscuity of his mind had found its anchor, its culmination, in the singularity of Mary's heart."

Chat GPT 4 took up Prince's "A man was unhappy, then he fell in love, then he was happy" (1973, 21), enumeration, not a narrative, to add causality in its last line: "He no longer merely existed; he lived, deeply and fully, because love had shown him the beauty that life could hold," calculating causality where none was actually indicated.

With Prince's tragic 'minimal story' example, "John was rich, then he travelled a lot, then, as a result, he was poor" (1973, 22), Squibler contorted a clearly tragic narrative into sappy comedy with a happy ending: "John found himself not only broke but strangely content. The meticulously organized world he once knew was gone, replaced by a newfound appreciation for the simple things, and a heart full of memories [...] even if that meant embracing a life less ordinary, and significantly less wealthy." It added "Isabella," whose "whirlwind of chaotic energy" and "zest for life" caused John's financial downfall, marked through a changing series of Instagram posts, "initially filled with pristine landscapes and perfectly composed selfies, started showcasing more candid shots of dusty trails and shared meals under starlit skies."

Chat GPT added causality to Prince's "John was rich and he travelled a lot but then he became poor" (1973, 22) (with no causality indicated): "However, as the years passed, John's extravagant lifestyle began to catch up with him. He seldom paid attention to his dwindling bank account, convinced that his wealth was endless. He lived in the moment, never considering the financial consequences of his choices." Causality unprompted. To this tragic framework, it concluded with a sappy happy end: "Though his wealth was gone, John carried with him the richness of his experiences. The world had been his playground, and though he was now without riches, he was rich in stories, lessons, and a perspective on life that few could rival." Note the typical LLM product's stylistic method of proffering threes: "stories, lessons, perspective." Squibler's response had the typical 'Not X, but Y' formula: "Not a dramatic, headline-grabbing collapse, but a slow, insidious erosion."

To Prince's "John was poor, then he earned a lot of money, then, however, he was rich" (1973, 24), Squibler spluttered "not from the heart, but from a pressure to meet expectations," and "not out of poverty, but out of a conscious choice." To Prince's "John was poor, then he earned a lot of money" (1973, 26), Squibler produced a "John (a kind, but perpetually unlucky carpenter, age 35),"

age unasked, “sawdust clinging to his worn clothes,” with a “scruffy terrier named Rusty,” explaining how John “earned a lot of money” – by repairing “a dilapidated antique music box for a wealthy, eccentric woman,” who gifts John money he uses to support other struggling artists. Rusty the dog enjoys “the finest organic dog biscuits money could buy.” As if any artificial narrative wouldn’t be complete without a Disney-styled mascot dog.

Squibler’s responses to prompts were full of ‘gentle hum,’ ‘No X. No Y. Just Zs’: “not in the quiet whispers of turning pages, but in the vibrant colours of a life shared,” and plenty of “kindly” bakers. To Prince’s minimal story “John was happy, then he ate an apple, then, as a result, he was unhappy” (1973, 27), Chat GPT 4 produced the conclusion “His once-cheerful mood had been replaced by a lingering discomfort, both physical and mental. It was just one apple, but it taught John an important lesson: sometimes, even the sweetest things can hide unpleasant surprises.”

Prince’s 1973 *Grammar* explains that “[n]ot any three events, the third of which is the inverse of the first, and conjoined in such a way that (a) the first even precedes the second in time and the second precedes the third, and (b) the second event causes the third, constitute a story” (29). “He was unhappy, then he met a woman, then, as a result, he was happy,” or “He was rich, then he lost a lot of money, then, as a result, he was poor,” are narratives. “He opened the door, then he saw Mary, then, as a result, he closed the door” (1973, 29), is not a story. Yet Chat GPT 4 makes it one, even adding a title, “The Unexpected Visitor”:

He opened the door, expecting to see the deliveryman with his long-awaited package. But instead, he saw Mary.

Mary. The last person he wanted to see.

Her sharp eyes met his, and for a moment, the air between them froze. She stood there, clutching a bag and wearing the same defiant expression she had the last time they spoke – when everything fell apart.

‘Hi,’ she said, her voice cutting through the silence.

He didn’t respond. Memories of their last argument flooded his mind: the shouting, the accusations, the slammed doors. He had worked so hard to move on, to rebuild his life without her chaos.

Perhaps too much explanation.

Without a word, he stepped back, his hand still on the doorknob. Slowly, deliberately, he closed the door. The latch clicked into place, and he stood there, leaning against it, breathing heavily.

Perhaps too much experientiality.

Outside, he heard Mary sigh and then her footsteps retreating. / He stayed by the door for a while, staring at the floor. It wasn’t anger that gripped him – it was relief. Sometimes, closing a door is the best thing you can do.

Too much narrativizing?

Squibler closed Prince’s prompt with: “a heated argument about their differing visions for the future,” the “the cool metal a comfort against the warmth of

his suddenly racing heart, and knew that while he'd closed the door on her, he hadn't closed the door on the question of what would happen next."

Prince's "John harmed Peter's brother, then Peter was very angry; then, as a result, Peter harmed John's brother" (1973, 31) elicited "content may violate usage policies. Did we get it wrong? Please tell us by giving this response a thumbs down" from Chat GPT.

Perhaps the most interesting and evocative of Prince's 'minimal stories' is the tragic "John was happy, then John met a woman, then, as a result, John was unhappy" (1973, 35). Here Prince's minimum requirements for a narrative could hardly be more clear: initial state, subsequent event, subsequent resulting secondary state (and experiencing position, with emotions only John himself could really know). Chat GPT makes the odd choice not of having the woman be the cause of John's unhappiness, but rather their "drifting apart" after meeting. Chat GPT would not let this pass as a tragedy, concluding, "Now, as he walked among the autumn leaves, John was unhappier than before – not because of what he had lost, but because he had glimpsed a life that wasn't truly his. Yet, deep down, John knew that happiness, like the seasons, would return in its own time, perhaps in a form he had yet to understand." The saccharine narrative closure almost makes one wish John a violent end. As Rainer Rehak has written on the language such products spit out and the reasoning they use to form rhetoric or narratives, they have an implicit assumption of "what is considered 'good' or 'desirable'," following "along the lines of the neo-liberal logic of applying quantification, competition, performance and efficiency in to all aspects of life," mixing in "masculinist – even militarist – fantasies of power, control, strength and subjugation of the natural or finally correcting the assumed defective" (2021, 97). Squibler did not attempt to correct the tragic 'defect' of Prince's minimal story, instead pushing John's unhappiness into melodrama, leaving him "profoundly, irrevocably unhappy."

Both LLM products tended to nuance tragic and comedic outcomes of the above, and of Prince's classic "John was unhappy, then John met a woman, then as a result, John was happy" (1973, 36): "Claire not only brought joy into his life, but had also helped him reconnect with a part of himself" and "They met not at a bar or through a dating app, but at a community gardening project."

With Prince's 'kernel simple story' "The sun was shining and the birds were singing and the cotton was high and John was happy. Then, the sun set. Then, as a result, John was unhappy" (1973, 38), Chat GPT fixed the 'defect' of an unhappy ending, as John reminds himself "that the sun would rise again, bringing with it another day of light, warmth, and the promise of renewed happiness." Squibler again is faithful to Prince's tragic closure, with John left "cold and empty in the encroaching night." With Prince's "John was happy but then the army drafted him, then, as a result, he was unhappy" (1973, 38), Chat GPT closed with "he endured, knowing that his unhappiness was a chapter, not the entirety of his story," while Squibler gave "He found no comfort in the war's cause, only a profound and bitter unhappiness." Either way, the products either 'fix' tragedy with sappy hopefulness, or stretch unhappiness toward bathos.

Likewise, with “The birds were flying and the fish were swimming and John was happy. Then he saw a dead tree, then, as a result, he was unhappy” (1973, 40), Chat GPT closed with “Yet, he knew that just as seasons change, so too does sorrow, and in time, happiness would find him again.” Squibler closed with John seeing “not just the death, but the silent promise of rebirth.” Prince experimented, as well, with story’s chronological order of telling: “John ate a magic apple, then, as a result, he was very rich. He had been very poor before” (1973, 39). Squibler took this cue to remind us that John “never forgot his past, using his fortune not for opulent displays of wealth, but to build a brighter future for others.” It went further: although John clearly consumed the apple, the story ends with its being “now a carefully preserved artifact, [...] a symbol not just of [John’s] wealth, but of his compassion.”

Prince’s more complex examples tended to result in stranger linguistic responses. To “John was happy, then John met Bill, then, as a result, John met Mary, then, as a result, John was unhappy and the sun was shining and the birds were singing” (1973, 52), Squibler described John’s happiness as “a quiet hum,” closing with “the beige of his former life” seemingly “a distant, almost utopian dream.”

To Prince’s “Eating pizza leads to evil. John was good, then, one day, he ate pizza, then, as a result, he was evil” (1973, 61), Chat GPT provided an unrequested title for the story: “The Curse of the Pizza.” Here, ‘good’ John is non-descript besides volunteering at an animal shelter, holding doors for strangers, and watering his neighbor’s plants. A tragic outcome is again overturned here, as now-‘evil’ John next eats a “Purity Pizza” and, turning good again, resolves to eat salad in the future, while ambiguously, “deep down” knowing that “pizza would always tempt him, lurking the shadows, waiting for another bite.”

Just as working at animal shelters, knitting scarves for the poor, or being a librarian and enjoying classical music are associated with a character’s ‘goodness,’ rampant in Chat GPT’s outputs are associations of poverty with living “on the edge of town” or “on the outskirts of town,” and that happiness is correlated with living in a “small town.” Its ‘stories’ read like Hallmark films.

To Prince’s example of a ‘complex story’ involving more than two plotlines (“John was unhappy and Peter was sick and James was poor. Then John met Mary and Peter took some medicine and James found a lot of money. Then, as a result, John was happy and Peter was healthy and James was rich” [1973, 73]), Squibler infers in conclusion: “The transformations, while independent, were all interconnected, proving that sometimes the smallest, most unexpected changes can ripple outwards.” The story it spins out has no account of how the three plots are connected, but the LLM product, perhaps because of Prince’s “as a result” appears only once.

To another of Prince’s ‘complex stories’ (“John was happy, then he met Joan, then, as a result, he was unhappy. Then, as a result, Peter was black, then he saw a bird, then, as a result, he was white” [1973, 75]) Chat GPT elaborates more than usual: “Peter was black – not just in skin, but in spirit,” and after the bird

has “gazed at Peter with eyes that seemed to see into his very soul,” for the first time in a long while, “Peter felt free.”

Stylistics aside, Chat GPT’s only complete failure with one of Prince’s complex stories was indeed one Prince himself saw as most complex: “John was poor, then he met Joan, then, as a result, he was rich, then, as a result Peter was poor, then he met Mary, then, as a result, he was rich, then, as a result, Jack was poor, then he met Ethel, then, as a result, he was rich” (1973, 82). Here John, being poor, naturally lives “at the edge of town.” Here, the LLM product did not suggest causality between John’s becoming rich and Peter’s becoming poor (in Prince’s narrative, the latter is clearly the result of the former), and neither is Jack’s sudden poverty the result of Peter’s regained wealth. Here, the LLM’s product’s essential nonunderstanding of causality is exposed. While it can simulate causality once, twice, or even three times in a story, six temporal events, each caused by the former, is too much. It’s easy to image that any human storyteller would quite easily infer that John gains wealth at Peter’s expense, and that Jack is poor *because* Peter has profited. This is literally how money and capitalism work, one character profiting off another. Strangely, each time one of Prince’s characters begins poor, he is miserable in his poverty, but those who become wealthy only to become impoverished again are curiously content with their memories of having been wealthy – a loss of fortune never results in anyone’s unhappiness or suffering.

### 3. Conclusion

Part of the problem in the experiments described above is that the prompts tried to elicit *fabula*, not *synuzhet*. Perhaps humans only offer a *synuzhet*, from which a *fabula* may be extrapolated (being based on real experiences), while commercial generative large language model products start with a *fabula*, attempting to extrapolate a *synuzhet*.

AI pioneer Herbert A. Simon’s autobiography reproduces his 1956 attempt at writing a short story, “The Apple: The Story of a Maze,” in which a man closed up alone all his life in a castle full of mazes, in which his experiences of art and reading literature can only involve

concrete objects taking on for him an abstract symbolic meaning. That is to say, his way of understanding the Bible was just the reverse of the way in which it was written. The authors of these stories had found in them a means for conveying to humble people in terms of their daily experiences profound truths about the meaning of the world. Hugo, deprived of these experiences, but experienced in abstraction, could usually translate the stories directly back to the propositions they sought to communicate. I do not mean to imply that Hugo completely understood all that he read. (1991, 180)

Some scholars worry “that a methodological move toward big data will see science transition from an explanatory model based on causality to correlation to a much weaker explanatory framework” (Srinivasan / Fish 2017, 109). “Keeping

frontier models front and center in government regulatory discussions was ideologically imperative to Doomers and convenient to Boomers and corporates for shifting attention away from regulating existing AI models and their problems” (Hao 2025, 306).

A friend recently asked, “I bet you, as a teacher, hate ChatGPT?” But it isn’t terribly hard to tell when it’s written a student’s essay. Google’s “neural network” is trained “on a dataset of over seven thousand unpublished English-language books ranging from romance to adventure” (Hao 2025, 121). Basically we get the voice of bad fan fiction.<sup>3</sup> Ideology is attached to form. For example, the happy resolutions of almost all ‘narratives’ produced by corporate generative large language model products: GPT-4’s training data was Common Crawl – with the filter removed, plus GitHub, links shared on Twitter, transcribed YouTube videos, and a text storage site called Pastebin (135–136). Traditionally, the way to control the output of a LLM product is to constrain the inputs. Now, instead, corporations like OpenAI are trying to control the outputs (137).

Whatever is truly ‘generative’ about these tools only pumps out variations of what has already been pumped in, much as it’s been imagined that a new sense of history with the European Enlightenment “assumed a temporal quality peculiar to itself, whose diverse times and shifting periods of experience drew its evidence from an exemplary past” (Koselleck 1985, 26–27).

We might like to imagine that “intelligence can be reduced to logic.” Yet logic “can only understand the future as a version of the past,” unable to “react to change, adapt to emergent threats, exploit fresh opportunities, cope with uncertainty, handle instability, innovate, or grow” (Fletcher 2023, 62). “Artificial intelligence” produces not non-narrative texts, but what might best be called “artificial narratives.” Like artificial sweeteners, paste jewelry, synthetic fibers or fabrics, they ‘work’ the ‘same’ as natural products, but are, close up, of lesser quality. And may come with side effects.

Mia Ballard’s novel *Shy Girl* (2025), overflowing with endless metaphors and similes using ‘like’ and ‘as if’ in remarkably strange ways, was pulled from the presses several weeks after its initial appearance once its publisher, Hachette UK, began receiving complaints that it seemed to have been generated by a commercial large language model product. And not even one particularly adapted for generating fictional prose. It was suspected of being AI-produced not so much because of its narrative structure, but because of the flatness of its characters, typical tells like trios of adjectives, overuse of similes and metaphors, and strange ways of describing human embodiment. Chat GPT was the most prominent suspect. The novel had, to use a description by Sam Kriss, that “very particular tone of A.I.-generated text, always slightly wide-eyed, overeager, insipid but also on the verge of some kind of hysteria” (2025, n.p.). Readers often reported they would not be dissuaded from reading a novel generated by a generative large language model product, but that they might approach such a novel differently from one written by a human author, and would like to be forewarned as to its ‘authorship.’ Readers reported feeling they had been ‘tricked’ by Ballard, not because she allegedly used such a product to compose the novel, but because she

was not forthcoming about her (alleged) use of ‘artificial intelligence.’ Because she pretended ‘as if’ the text were human-created. Readers commonly felt that it was only ‘like’ literature – not just bad, but insulting.

As playwright Ayad Akhtar has his protagonist say in the *McNeal* (2024), devolving into madness in using a generative large language model to compose his work, “Digital machines are not just remaking stories, they’re remaking us. [...] Possessing a record of our past, the technology would appear to know our *future*” (2024, n.p.). Or maybe not so much? Perhaps, as Akhtar’s protagonist muses, it is “like a ventriloquist dummy, parroting lines he not only didn’t write, but probably didn’t even understand. [...] The words he’s saying sound like they’re in the right order, but the only sense they’re making is this otherworldly magnetism,” yet “as fateful for our country as his head was empty,” a “vehicle for ideas,” for “a vision that came from somewhere – and someone – else” (n.p.).

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<sup>1</sup> See [https://jamesapsard.com/the-great-gatsby-by-f-scott-fitzgerald-1925/?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://jamesapsard.com/the-great-gatsby-by-f-scott-fitzgerald-1925/?utm_source=chatgpt.com) (04.10.2026).

<sup>2</sup> See <https://openai.com/policies/usage-policies> (04.10.2026).

<sup>3</sup> “Genre literature is virtually defined by the recurrence of certain elements, making it particularly suitable for AI generation” (Bajohr 2023, n.p.)