

Social Media Narrative:
Issues in Contemporary Practice

hosted by The Rutgers Camden Digital Studies Center and Judy Malloy
and the Rutgers Camden DSC Class in Social Media Narrative:

Lineage and Contemporary Practice
Facebook, November 16 - 21, 2016

Transcript: Chris Rodley

News Feed



Chris Rodley

November 17 at 7:19am

Hi there! My name is Chris Rodley, and I'm a writer and grad student from Sydney, Australia. I'm super excited to be here and want to thank Judy for being the incredible visionary behind this.

If you're on Twitter a heck of a lot, you might possibly have seen my bot Magic Realism Bot, which is a collaboration with my sister Ali. Every two hours, it tweets a randomly generated micro-story in the style of writers such as Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel García Márquez and Isabel Allende. I wrote the syntax, phrases and vocab lists, but not the code. Here's the Facebook version, though it's a pale shadow of the original: [Magic Realism Bot](#).

(People sometimes ask how it works. It uses a template-based technique akin to Apples to Apples or Cards Against Humanity: I wrote general, abstract syntaxes with all the key words missing and the code fills in the blanks by selecting from very carefully tagged vocabulary lists. But there's lots of wild cards and other features to make the results more complex, coherent and variable.)

I could talk about lots of things but here's four related issues that I often think about:

1. Every day there's lots of warm, convivial interactions in the mentions of the bot, and I don't think I can ever remember seeing any trolls or aggression. Check out this Twitter search of the bot's mentions to see how users are responding to it in real time:

<https://twitter.com/search?f=tweets&vertical=default&q=magicrealismbot&src=typd> How common is that phenomenon in the comments sections of creative projects on social media, I wonder? Is it related to the fairly gentle tone of the narratives? (I noticed the same thing in the mentions of Philip Pullman's delightful Twitter story "Jeffrey the Housefly"). What factors help or hinder it? Can we repurpose or recode platforms to inspire greater sociality than Twitter allows (those reacting to a tweet often talk alongside each other, not to each other)? Can social media be utilized for works of "relational aesthetics", to use Bourriaud's term? Can it be an inspiration in making online spaces for welcoming?

2. A common reaction is for people to relate the bot to people and events in the news, which meant it took on an odd role in refracting the US election season through a magical, otherworldly lens. Sometimes the connection was fairly obvious — it's easy to see Hillary Clinton in "A blonde lawyer falls in love with late capitalism". But people also related apparently abstract tweets to politics, such as "A clairvoyant turns over a tarot card with a pianist on it. 'Your destiny is to become a gas station attendant,' she says to you" which people interpreted as a comment upon widening inequality.

3. Another common reaction is for a user to relate a tweet to their own lives, or to someone in their social circle. I like to think of this as "botomancy", a digital form of bibliomancy (the old-fashioned method of fortune telling by consulting a random line in the Bible). Botomancy is a way of finding out about ourselves using the random recombinations of bots. I've noticed this phenomenon going right back to Allison Parrish's @everyword, the Australopithecus of the Twitter bot's evolutionary history: what seemed to be simply an alphabetical list of words was quickly embraced by users as a way of understanding themselves and their lives (LGBT users later embraced the spin-off bot @everywordisgay in the same way). I'm not quite sure what to make of this phenomenon, but I wonder if it points to the value of randomness in an increasingly rationalized, algorithmic world? It's also a reminder that in social media e-lit, understanding the context and audience reception is even more important than in traditional lit. A critic who only saw the tweets of @everyword would have zero understanding of the incredible responses the work catalysed.

4. As I've shown, the human audience is a huge part of machine-generated literature. Another big part, of course, is the human authors! One of the most striking things about the early responses to Magic Realism Bot is that people would seemingly assume the stories arose from scratch, from a tabula rasa, perhaps via a deep learning engine which had learnt the DNA of magic realist stories by munching through thousands of them. I'm sure that will appear sometime in the 21st century, but machine-learning recreations of narratives are preeety crappy compared to the human version. One of the key aims in Magic Realism Bot was to make a bot which relied not on technically innovative processes per se but simply aimed for innovative results by any means necessary (except for cheating by writing, editing or curating tweets, which I'm sometimes accused of but am far too lazy for). This was achieved through clever coding but also some workaday, traditional-ish human authorship: I had to come up with lots and lots and lots of different magic realist templates and small variations in those templates. Other botmakers are often surprised at how big the database is and how often we update it, because the culture is very much to create "set and forget" bots (one exception is Nora Reed who regularly updates the wonderful @thinkpiecebot).

I say all this to make a much more general point: we don't need to think of these bots in a dualistic way as either machine (eg @oliviatasters) or person (eg @horse_ebooks). Rather, bots on social platforms are hybrids of authors, their tools, and the responses of other social media users (usually the readers, but sometimes also other random users whose content has been swept up and spat out again). I wonder what other kinds of literary machines we could create if freed from the obligation to regard them as fully automated entities?

Comments



Judy Malloy Good morning and welcome to the creator of The Magic Realism Bot, Chris Rodley, who is a PhD candidate at the University of Sydney, where he is studying the impact of social media on writing

Visit <http://www.narrabase.net/socmedianarrative.html#chris> to find out more!



November 17 at 8:06am



Judy Malloy Hi Chris, fantastic exploration of The Magic Realism Bot and the botsphere as a whole. Great to have you here!

November 17 at 8:09am



Bronwen Thomas Really enjoyed reading this. As you may remember, Chris, am including your work in an upcoming article on twitterfic - I wish I'd had the benefit of reading this beforehand. Am fascinated by your insights into the creative process behind the account. I confess to having been a bit disappointed to find out that a retelling of Ulysses I followed on Twitter was automated, as it seemed so ****ed clever. Your account of your practice gives me hope that maybe my initial excitement and enthusiasm wasn't so far off.... As for the lack of trolling, perhaps there is a parallel here to be drawn with other forms of fiction and creativity in online/digital spaces - for example fanfic where comments are nearly always complimentary bordering on gushing. Partly I think just because fans want to keep the whole thing going for as long as possible. Am currently writing a book on Literature and Social Media so will be coming back to a lot of these issues I think - and will probably be pestering you for permissions again!!

November 17 at 12:44pm



Chris Rodley Thanks Bronwen! Can't wait to see the article. You're right — the fanfic spaces are like that. Shamefully I haven't spent much time in them myself, but I should. Can you explain what you mean about being disappointed that the Ulysses bot was automated?

November 18, 2016 at 7:02am



Bronwen Thomas Sure. The account in question, as you may know, is a retelling of Ulysses which I loved as the way in which it has been broken up into 140 characters seems to me to offer a great

way into the novel, but also to foreground passages and phrases in ways that bring them to life and made them memorable. It chimed with something I read once by a Joyce scholar who said the reason people struggle with his work is that they try to read it all at once and to make sense of the whole rather than appreciating its wonderful moments. I confess to having no idea about how the tweets were produced until some time after I had been following the account, and even then my ignorance about bots, algorithms etc clearly gets in the way. As I was looking at this in the context of discussions around creativity on twitter I guess the disappointment came from learning that what I had taken to be creative choices about how to break up the text might just be random/automated, but your post has offered me a different perspective. So maybe I need to go back and speak to the guy behind the Ulysses project....

November 18 at 7:07am



[Chris Rodley Bronwen Thomas](#) Ah, I see. I guess part of that is that the text itself is so dense and rich it works even cut up randomly (the Finnegans Wake bot is always reliably fascinating). The other useful affordance of Twitter for literary bots is that the bot enthusiasts can follow the firehose of tweets (many of which are perhaps low quality) but they retweet the best ones, which most people get to see. Will definitely stay in touch, as my PhD is looking at writing on social media too, but from a somewhat different angle. Will definitely be citing your work!

November 18 at 7:17am



[Bronwen Thomas](#) Excellent. Your post has confirmed for me once again that those of us who write about new media but don't "do" it are way behind the loop....good luck with the PhD!

November 18, 2016 at 7:02am



[Zack Zampino](#) Hi Chris, I've followed Magic Realism Bot for a few months now, I love it. My friends joke that each tweet is like a movie pitch from some insane Hollywood producer.

I'm curious, I notice that a majority of the words used by Magic Realism Bot are fairly ordinary and mundane, but when combined to form the randomly generated sentences create very bizarre surreal images. Did you set out to create the Bot with Magic Realism in mind, or did that come after you saw the sort of ideas it was generating using the language?

November 18 at 5:19pm



[Chris Rodley](#) Sorry for the late reply Zack! It was definitely intended as magic realism from the beginning. More specifically, it was originally designed as a generative version of Jorge Luis

Borges's story premises. However, after a few weeks, I realised that it was actually better at doing fantastical, imagistic magic realism than the conceptual and metatextual style that Borges was famous for. Regarding mundane vs interesting words: actually I made a concerted effort to fill it with "magic-ish" concrete and abstract nouns. Swans, owls, clocks, stars, rainbows, moons, love, time, infinity, opposites, nothingness. Gradually, though, I put in quite a few mundane contemporary words too, and that was really just to ensure maximum variation.

November 20 at 9:10pm



[Antoinette LaFarge](#) I find it striking that your code defined its own genre along the way. Have you analyzed why you found it so hard to structure a Borgesian bot?

November 21 at 3:36pm



[Chris Rodley](#) Antoinette LaFarge Yes! It wasn't so much that the bot found it difficult to do the Borgesian stuff; more that it proved to be very good at certain kinds of stories, and I let it 'play to its strengths'.

The Borges stuff was absolutely the foundation of the idea. Long ago, over 10 years ago, I was jotting down ideas for Borges-esque stories using a process that I noticed him using a lot: find the logical purpose or telos of a structure and exaggerate it ad absurdum. (For example, the Library of Babel is like the Library of Congress but exaggerated to a fantastical degree; same for the famous map as big as the territory it sits upon, or the author who copied Don Quixote word for word.) I would try to apply this formula to things like ATMs or chess or Christmas. The bot was really an attempt to automate that process. It worked very well but there's only so many times you want to read about an Olympic marathon that's infinitely long, etc. Also it was difficult to capture the metatextual nature of Borges simply because of the 140 character word limit. I'd code sentences of this type — "A Syrian philologist discovers an ancient Babylonian manuscript which describes a marathon that is infinitely long" — but invariably they'd go over 140 characters.

Meanwhile, I was noticing that some of the best ones were actually very simple imagistic premises like "a little princess lives in a palace made of ice-cream" or "a Chinese boy falls into a lake filled with tigers and clocks. He is never seen again". That's way too children's lit (or heaven forbid middlebrow) for Borges, but I liked it so we went with it.

November 22, 2016 at 9:29am ·

[Deena Larsen](#) hi Chris, I really like the idea that " Rather, bots on social platforms are hybrids of authors, their tools, and the responses of other social media users (usually the readers, but sometimes also other random users whose content has been swept up and spat out again." I wonder- if we have this melange of human and bot interaction, what happens to turing tests? do we need to draw distinctions? Do readers relate to or read generated texts differently than they do human generated texts?

November 19 at 8:33pm



[Chris Rodley](#) Hi [Deena](#)! Before answering I have to say I got lost in the absolutely incredible Marble Springs alternate universe last night. So deeply affecting in its fine-grained detail and verisimilitude, I can't think of an elit project quite like it. I've got a couple of questions for you but I'll put them in that thread. I'm going to respond to part 3 of your question first then come back and answer the rest because I'm not quite sure what I think about those yet 😊 :)

3. I do think readers read generative texts differently from human-authored ones. I say this because we got so many comments from readers in the beginning saying it must be "fake"; and also we continue to get lots of replies and direct messages from people wanting to check if it's ~really~ all generative or if it's curated or edited (it's not). And I must admit I myself felt disappointed to find out that @horse_ebooks wasn't a spambot; I still respect it as a cool work of art, but it didn't have the same magic. I guess I'd compare this to our fascination with those weird news stories about chimpanzees or elephants that paint Pollock-style 'masterpieces'. We are interested in such works not just because of the visual or literary components; the artwork's invisible "aura", pace Walter Benjamin, matters too. Partly, maybe, a sense of wonderment that 'dumb machines' or animals can do something like this? Also, for people who are using the bot to make sense of their lives (eg the US election) it does matter that it's random rather than being sneakily written or curated by me: there's no fun in in (say) finding the connection to Donald Trump in the tweet below if it was placed there by me intentionally.

Though now I think of it, the example tweet below is a good example of how it's never either machine or human ("bot or not"). Even though that was generated randomly, it would never have happened if I hadn't intentionally put "the Republican Party" in the list of abstract nouns due to it being election season (and specifically the Republican Party, not the Democrats).

November 20, 2016 at 11:01pm



[Deena Larsen](#) I wonder if we do take our wisdom differently when we know the source, though...

November 20 at 10:55pm



[Deena Larsen](#) Thanks

November 20 at 10:55pm



[Chris Rodley](#)



Kirsty
@wontardid



This is my favourite Donald Trump origin story.

Magic Realism Bot @MagicRealismBot

A necromancer saves up his money in order to buy the Republican Party.

November 20 at 10:56pm



[Chris Rodley](#) [Deena Larsen](#) Do you mean that we imbue bots with more wisdom than humans, or less? (In answer to the other questions: yeah, I think the Turing test is much more blurry than it's made out to be: human communication is usually mediated by machines, and machine communication usually has some human ingenuity in there; I guess we do need to make a distinction — I don't want to talk to a robot if I'm on an online dating app — but it's a gradient not a binary)

November 22 at 9:33am



[Deena Larsen](#) Actually, sort of the other way around. That humans interpret words --and imbue their interpretations with wisdom. Think of fortune cookies--everyone at the table will take the fortune they get and try to interpret it in the context of their own lives.

"You are locked away in a little girl's mind" (today's tweet) could be interpreted in many ways--and in Twitter, you don't get the context of a novel--you get the context of all the other tweets in your feed (like the fortune cooking--you don't get the Tao Te Ching, you get a strip of paper at the end of a meal...very different contexts). So I think that we imbue these short sayings with interpretations from our lives...

November 22 at 9:40am



[Chris Rodley](#) [Deena Larsen](#) Yes! I see what you mean now. I often see people do this with astrology too. The particular horoscope was maybe made up by a bored office intern but people use it to think about themselves/their lives

November 22, 2016 at 2:49pm



[Joe Sansone](#) Hey Chris I checked out your bot and I had a quick question about it. Why did you choose a site like Twitter that limits the amount of characters that you can use over other mediums to for your project?

November 20 at 9:41pm



Chris Rodley Great question! To be honest I didn't ever really consider other services (maybe I should have).

Some reasons:

1. The vast majority of creative bots/literary bots of this kind on social media are on Twitter. There's a bot culture on Reddit (and Wikipedia), but they're generally functional rather than expressive. There's also a few on Tumblr, and more recently there's interactive chatbots on Facebook Messenger and Kik. But Twitter is where the artist community is, and more important where the readers are. Also Twitter is relatively friendly towards bots (even featuring some in the "Moments" tab) whereas (for example) Snapchat instabans them.

2. For this bot project in particular, the 140 character limit isn't a concern. (Well, a little more space would be nice, 160-180, maybe.) The reason is that it's really hard to create a long-form coherent idea with simple generative techniques. I have tried this in a few different projects with my collaborator Andrew Burrell — see <https://chrisrodley.com/2013/10/10/datafiction-v0-1/> or <https://chrisrodley.com/.../19/everything-is-going-to-be-ok/> — but after a while it can quickly devolve into nonsense (unless you put in lots of hardcoded text to keep it on the rails). For example, a tweet about a Moon falling in love with a rose bush makes sense, but if I made that into a paragraph-long story, the Moon would start doing lots of inexplicable things like sneezing or kissing a lion inside a pyramid.

3. We did do a version off Twitter -- you can check it out here. <http://magicrealismbot.com/> ... This was for a gallery exhibition in London. We would have probably increased the character limit here, if we had time.

November 20 at 10:32pm



Antoinette LaFarge I find that many literary bots get dull quickly, but your Magic Realism bot doesn't. I think that is in part because it is very well structured to throw up interesting images without turning them into madlibs mishmosh. I was also struck by what you said about people tending to "relate the bot to people and events in the news." This was something I experienced with my Plaintext Players online performance group. No matter what we were improvising, if there was a vivid story in the news, sooner or later an associative leap would be made that brought it inside the improvisation narrative. For instance, one improv we did that used the structure of a trial was invaded by random characters from the first OJ Simpson murder trial. Another improv, which had 1st century Romans meditating on the then-imminent Iraq War (already an associative leap!), merged with mourning for the loss of the Columbia space shuttle. It was always viscerally powerful

when this happened, in part because it was an unpremeditated response, an acknowledgment that all stories are part of Borges's infinite library or Rushdie's ocean.

November 21 at 3:50pm



[Chris Rodley](#) Wow, that is just my kind of theatre/improv, and the merging of news and myth/history/fiction is so fascinating to me (and, oddly, not that common?). I'm just discovering the Plaintext Players website Antoinette, will come back tomorrow and comment fully.

November 22, 2016 at 9:37am ·



[Judy Malloy](#) Hello [Chris Rodley](#)

On this panel your words and your answers to questions from [Bronwen Thomas](#) [Zack Zampino](#) [Deena Larsen](#) and [Antoinette LaFarge](#) have clarified how you used carefully tagged vocabulary lists; addressed the role randomness in the contemporary algorithmic infosphere; addressed "workaday, traditional-ish human authorship"; looked at the role of Jorge Luis Borges's story premises and the structure of a Borgesian bot in your work; considered how readers relate to/read generated texts -- and documented many other things that the reader of this segment of the Social Media Narrative panel can and should return to, return to.

In your statement you ask: "Can social media be utilized for works of 'relational aesthetics', to use Bourriaud's term? Can it be an inspiration in making online spaces for welcoming?"

Your question is continually answered by the output from the [Magic Realism Bot](#) and in closing, it seems appropriate to quote a few memorable selections from the always surprising output from this extraordinary contribution to Twitter and bot making culture:

Magic Realism Bot [Magic Realism Bot](#) Oct 24

A radish made of rose petals is growing in an Athenian garden. A philosopher writes a book about it.

Magic Realism Bot [@MagicRealismBot](#) Oct 19

A poet listens to a CD that plays the sounds of the number Pi.

Magic Realism Bot [@MagicRealismBot](#) Sep 25

A flamingo appears before George Washington. It says: "Leave this world. Make a new life on the Moon."

Magic Realism Bot [@MagicRealismBot](#) Sep 22

A stained glass ocean liner sails across a sea of the dawn of time.

Magic Realism Bot @MagicRealismBot Sep 18

A tiny rainbow is in a Swiss garden. A literary critic writes a dissertation about it.

Magic Realism Bot @MagicRealismBot Aug 21

A math teacher is weeping inside a little girl's mind.

Magic Realism Bot @MagicRealismBot Jun 3

An opera house is haunted by the ghost of a screenwriter. He keeps repeating a mysterious phrase: "The leopard is three-dimensional."

Magic Realism Bot @MagicRealismBot May 24

A cook makes a pie. Inside is imagination.

Thanks Chris for taking the time to visit this panel and for your generous answers and your endlessly fascinating work!

November 30, 2016 at 8:49am



Chris Rodley That is so incredibly lovely of you to say that Judy, and a wonderful summary of what I didn't quite realise I'd said! Quite surreal to me too since you are great creative hero of mine 😊 :) I had actually not seen any of these tweets because I put myself in a cone of silence over the past few months (it was taking up too much of my mental energy...). So it is doubly nice to read these here, for the first time. I am working on some significant additions to the bot for 2017 (not taking anything away, but adding material that might change the tone a little). If don't have any objection, I will send you a selection of the new output because I would love to have your thoughts (some of the feedback I've received warned me I was going to "break it", but then people said that when I added in lots of other elements too, like the puzzles & riddles).

December 1, 2016 at 12:21am



Chris Rodley I will also be in the US in October/November next year as I finish up my thesis (on social media & creativity no less!), so it would be wonderful if the timing is right to come by and visit your class.

December 1, 2016 at 12:23am



Kate McSweeney Blair This bot is gorgeous. Do you mind if I use it for personal drawing prompts?

November 30, 2016 at 8:59am



Chris Rodley Of course! I keep meaning to put some sort of statement to that effect in the bio.

December 1, 2016 at 12:21am



Kate McSweeney Blair Thank you!

December 1, 2016 at 10:23am