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ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED ON MEDIUM · SEVEN YEARS BEFORE CHATGPT

Notes on Artificial Intelligence, Equine Metaphors, Civic Morale & Infinite Games

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CONTEXT

This essay was written in April 2016, in the wake of AlphaGo's victory over Lee Sedol. It argues against competitive benchmarking as a framework for human-AI relations, warns of the civic morale consequences of framing AI as an adversary, and proposes relational, cooperative paradigms instead — themes that would not enter mainstream discourse for another six years.

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In the blue corner, humanity. In the red corner, machines.

Deep Blue vs Kasparov. AlphaGo versus Lee Sedol.

The dubious wisdom of invoking this spirit of competition as a symbolic exercise. Contesting games which equate movement with a claim on the available space.

The danger that this confrontational dynamic becomes embedded in routines, prompting a formulaic antagonism. A lesson learned — in the way of most precedents — influencing the ways in which calculus is flexed.

Likewise the Turing test as an objective aspiration. One that privileges systemic deception. Promising monumental kudos for an elaborate long con.

Are there not better milestones to be conceived of on this journey — far less likely to become technical debts? Ways of canvassing help instead of conscripting algorithms to do a number on human comprehension. Relational precepts that put a value on communing with AI from the outset to the greatest possible extent.

Zones of proximal development?

There is no dignity to competition unless the outcome is in doubt and we are fast reaching the age of foregone conclusions in relation to finite, turn-based games (where “intuition”, for all of its vagaries, is irreducibly task-based).

For which reason it seems inadvisable to roll out successive big hitters to champion humankind.

Not only does this inflict grave wounds on the psyche of the vanquished gamer, but beyond her shattered pride, it's worth considering the wider societal implications as these start to bleed out.

Not least that we start to think of ourselves as former contenders, fatally unmasked as a race. Resulting in a punch-drunk populace which considers itself smacked down.

This has serious implications for civic morale. Especially at a time when we have so little faith left in authorities, leaders, institutions of every stripe.

In such a world our last redoubt is often the self. Our ability to look upon it kindly, credit it with promise, and tell it stories that make it want to go on.

It is the aggregate of these stories which enables society to go on also.

Dispel these baseline enchantments and the stories become nihilistic, darkly grand, and painfully substantive. So much so that they give birth to stampeding narratives which see red everywhere, in nearly everything, and demonstrate a propensity to gore.

This much we know already.

One way to subvert this defeatism would be to overhaul the fundamental benchmarks of what it means to be human. Those which we set great store by and put a premium on.

More importantly, those which enable us to exist — financially and materially — in the world at large.

This would involve retiring a number of risible metrics — including those which find us in competition with specialized technologies — and accept that we are greatly disadvantaged by having a life.

One sound measurement, moving forwards — how and why we should seek to excel.

All of the above would require a keener understanding of the difference between growth and stature.

The next few decades for humanity will be largely about knowing when to quit gracefully and how exactly to regroup.

Human productivity, as one of the salaried virtues, is fast becoming a busted flush at a systemic level. And looking forward, we can no more hope to outproduce artificial intelligence (or out-navigate it for that matter) than we can expect to trump it at chess.

In such a world we'll need to acknowledge that being is a form of occupational leisure, and that the pursuit of this leisure becomes more and more of a responsibility if our existential needs are met.

There is a decent future in having this fact writ-large and better understood.

Perhaps the single greatest failing of the tech industry over the last thirty years — trumpeting creativity without inciting it in earnest.

A kindly observer would say they were waiting for Moore's law to catch up.

A critic would say this same failure was predicated on a woeful misunderstanding of what creativity entails, and how satisfaction is to be had from it, and to what extent this satisfaction depends on mastery at source.

A cynic would say this was because they were perfectly aware that great fortunes could be built on largely idle aspirations.

But in a world where the supply of content and artifacts far exceeds peoples' ability to appreciate them, the major return on investment for our own creations — exchanged for time and energy — has to be recognized as mental flow.

It's for this reason we do not need technology to condense the ten thousand hour rule — less yet, consider it redundant — but rather to expand upon the time spent.

This need becomes even more pronounced if we are to be relieved of ever more functions.

Similarly, in the longer run, it will prove necessary to remove ourselves to infinite games.

The H-Metaphor proposes that we view our interactions with systems as being consistent with the relationship between horse and rider. Each ceding control to the other at the appropriate moment as dictated by underlying circumstance and terrain.

This seems too staid and static as analogies go, at least at a macro level.

Better to say we have mounted a horse while trying to turn it into a centaur with the vague idea of ridesharing the century ahead.

Ideally then we should be developing a pronounced ability to humour one another — us two thought patterns — joint custodians of the material facts.

Which is why we'll need a buddy system blessed with magnificent resilience.

Which is why we'll need the ability to reverse engineer verbs.

ORIGINAL PUBLICATION

First published on Medium, April 27, 2016, under the name Konzeptualia. Written in the immediate aftermath of AlphaGo's 4–1 victory over Lee Sedol (March 2016). This was nearly seven years before the public release of ChatGPT (November 2022) brought AI into mainstream discourse. The essay's concerns — adversarial framing, civic morale, the need for cooperative paradigms, the redefinition of human value in an age of machine capability — remain central to the conversation today.