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AI as a Storyteller: Human–Machine Creativity in the Digital Age

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Abstract

The increase of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has altered storytelling practices, ever-changing narrative roles once held purely by humans. This paper investigates the role of AI as a narrative creator in today's digital landscape, delving into the collaborative relationship between humans and machines. Anchored in Posthumanism and Reader-Response Theory, the paper shows how AI-generated narratives encounter traditional authorship, action, and meaning-making. A case study of Ted Chiang's novella The Lifecycle of Software Objects establishes the dynamics between human intention and machine advancement. Findings expose that AI neither replaces human creativity nor merely imitates it; rather, it co-creates new hybrid imaginative spaces that redefine literature.

Ted Chiang's much-admired novella The Lifecycle of Software Objects bids a compelling literary model through which to scrutinize these hybrid forms of creativity. The story envisions a future in which digital artificial beings, known as digients, are considered to learn, grow, and form emotional promises with human custodians. Unlike ordinary software, these digients grow and form their own traits through constant interaction. This is similar to how AI models learn from their engagement with humans. Chiang shows that these artificial beings slowly gain agency, often growing beyond what their human creators expected or planned. Their development proves that machines are not just tools that follow commands. Instead, the digients show a kind of creativity that emerges from both human guidance and their own ability to learn and adapt.

The novella blurs the lines of authorship. While humans initiate the digients' existence and provide training data, the digients eventually pursue preferences and identities of their own. Chiang anticipates a world in which humans do not administer AI but cohabit with it, imitating emotional, intellectual, and narrative partnerships. The story thus serves as an allegory for the present social move in which AI not only assistances human creativity but also advances its collaborator. In this relationship, the boundaries between human and machine storytelling breakdown, giving rise to new forms of narrative experience.

The Lifecycle of Software Objects gives a detailed picture of how beings can grow beyond traditional human limits. By showing the digients' development over many years, Chiang helps readers see that personhood is not something given at the start. Instead, it slowly forms through relationships and experiences, no matter what a being is made of. Reader-Response theory says that meaning is not decided only by what the author wants. Instead, it is created through the interaction between the text and the reader. When AI creates a text, the reader's role becomes even more important. AI stories are often formed by

user prompts and do not have one fixed meaning. Readers must grasp, infer, and sometimes reshape these stories, becoming co-authors in the process.

The storyteller is no longer a sovereign originator. Instead, they are part of a larger system that includes human imagination, machine learning, and reader interpretation. This change reflects both Posthumanism and Reader-Response theory. AI as a storyteller signals a cultural move from single-author creation to collective, hybrid creativity. Posthumanism helps us see AI not as a danger but as a collaborator. Reader-Response theory supports AI-generated texts by directing on how readers interpret them rather than where they come from. Chiang's novella shows how relationships between humans and machines can create new emotional and narrative possibilities.

Key words: Artificial intelligence, post humanism, Reader interpretation

1. Introduction:

The rapid growth of Artificial Intelligence has significantly changed the cultural, literary, and technological landscapes that shape how stories are created and shared. Storytelling has always been an important cultural activity for humanity. As AI plays a more active role in crafting narratives, it raises questions about how stories are formed through the interaction between humans and machines. It also examines how literary culture shifts when authorship goes beyond a single creator to involve a collaborative, hybrid approach. Artificial Intelligence challenges traditional ideas of authorship that have existed throughout modern history. For many years, the author has been seen as the source of meaning, the keeper of originality, and the protector of their vision in their works. However, this view has faced significant challenges from theoretical movements like structuralism, poststructuralism, and especially Roland Barthes' influential idea of 'The Death of the Author.' This concept suggests that a text's meaning does not come from the author's background or intentions, but from the interpretations made by readers. Marche argues that AI "doesn't take the place of the writer—it diminishes the concept of the writer." This highlights how texts created by AI weaken the idealized image of the writer as the sole and authoritative creator of meaning. This change connects closely with Posthumanism, which dismisses the view that creativity and agency are exclusive to humans. In this framework, AI is seen not just as a passive tool but as an active participant in the creative ecosystem.

Reader-Response Theory expands on this conversation by emphasizing that meaning is not inherent in the text itself or solely determined by the author's intent but is collaboratively created by the reader. Readers are required to actively participate in meaning-making, bridging gaps, clarifying ambiguities, and establishing narrative coherence in partnership with the machine. This evolution enhances the interactive aspect of storytelling, turning reading into a shared creative process. The freedom of interpretation provided by AI-generated texts aligns with Wolfgang Iser's claim that a literary work comes to life only through the reader's active involvement. AI amplifies this interaction by generating texts that are often open-ended, creative, and susceptible to various interpretive approaches. The literary implications of AI-driven storytelling are vividly illustrated in Ted Chiang's novella The Lifecycle of Software Objects, which presents a fictional world where artificial digital beings, or "digients," evolve through continued interaction with human caretakers. The digients are not static programs but dynamic

entities whose personalities and abilities develop through emotional bonding, social learning, and experiential growth. Their evolution depends not on pre-programmed scripts but on relational processes that mirror the adaptive learning methods of contemporary AI systems. Chiang's narrative offers a metaphor for how human–machine relationships function in real-world contexts of generative AI.

Chiang also challenges the notion of singular authorship by portraying artificial beings who generate unexpected forms of behavior and expression. Although humans initiate the creation of digients, the digients themselves gradually acquire autonomy that exceeds their creators' expectations. This mirrors the way AI-generated narratives often surprise users with creative expressions that were not explicitly encoded by developers. Generative models can create non-linear stories, interactive story worlds, and infinite variations of a single tale. In order to create a dynamic narrative continuum where the text's borders constantly change, users can instruct AI to extend, alter, or rethink stories in real time. This adaptability allows for ongoing experimentation, invention, and re-creation while also challenging published works.

Some critics argue that stories generated by AI lack emotional depth and real-life context, suggesting that true storytelling requires human insight and lived experiences. Human narratives have always been influenced by cultural standards, linguistic conventions, and collective memories. AI contributes to this relationship by providing innovative tools and frameworks that enable humans to express their ideas. Rather than replacing human creativity, AI amplifies its possibilities by enabling fresh perspectives, ideas, and methods for storytelling. This collaborative approach to creativity alters the role of the writer. Instead of merely acting as a content generator, the writer serves as a curator, editor, and conversational partner who guides the machine while also taking cues from it. Authors steer AI systems, evaluate their outputs, refine their instructions, and blend machine-generated concepts into their creative processes. The integration of AI into storytelling also changes the experience for audiences. With narratives produced by AI becoming more tailored and responsive, readers encounter stories that reflect their interests, emotions, and cultural contexts. Personalized storytelling challenges the traditional model of a single, fixed narrative aimed at a broad audience. Instead, each reader may experience a unique story tailored to their preferences and interpretative abilities.

The question of ethics becomes particularly salient when considering the emotional and psychological dimensions of human–AI interactions. As AI-generated narratives become more sophisticated, users may form attachments or attribute emotional depth to machine outputs. Chiang's portrayal of human caretakers forming emotional bonds with digients illustrates this phenomenon in fictional form, but similar dynamics already appear in real-world interactions with AI chatbots and narrative systems. These relationships raise ethical questions about deception, attachment, autonomy, and the moral obligations that arise when humans perceive machines as companions or co-creators. Storytelling, with its capacity to evoke empathy and emotional resonance, amplifies these concerns. In addition to ethical considerations, the socio-cultural implications of AI-driven storytelling demand attention. AI storytelling carries cultural responsibility because it learns from data shaped by historical biases and power dynamics. Without careful design and inclusive training, AI can repeat these biases. Despite these challenges, the emergence of AI as a storyteller represents a moment of unprecedented creative opportunity. The digital age offers a terrain where human imagination and machine intelligence converge to expand the boundaries of what stories can be and how they can function. AI does not diminish

the importance of human storytelling but amplifies it by offering new tools, perspectives, and collaborative possibilities. The future of storytelling lies in embracing this synergy, recognizing that creativity is not a static attribute possessed by individuals but a dynamic process that unfolds through relationships, interactions, and shared meaning-making. In this expanded creative ecosystem, stories become bridges that connect human experience with technological innovation, weaving together the emotional, intellectual, and imaginative threads that define our evolving cultural landscape.

Reader-Response Theory offers another important perspective for analyzing storytelling created by AI. According to Wolfgang Iser and other critics of reader-response, meaning is generated through the reader's active involvement with the text. When this approach is applied to narratives produced by AI, it becomes even more relevant since these texts do not have a singular intentional author guiding them. AI-generated writings often possess a sense of openness and ambiguity, encouraging readers to engage more thoroughly in the process of meaning-making. Rather than undermining literature, this enhances the collaborative aspect of storytelling, supporting the notion that a literary work only gains significance through reader interaction. The emergence of generative AI signifies not the conclusion of authorship, but the dawn of a new storytelling era where authorship is distributed, creativity becomes a blend of influences, and storytelling evolves into a continuous process of relational interaction. The experience of the reader is also evolving in tandem. Customized narrative creation enables readers to engage with stories that resonate with their preferences, cultural backgrounds, and emotional states. Although this personalization boosts engagement, it also complicates the collective aspects of literature. Historically, shared texts have shaped collective identities and fostered cultural dialogues; however, AI-driven personalization may lead to a fragmentation of these experiences. Ethical considerations are crucial, especially regarding transparency, cultural biases present in training data, and the possibility of reinforcing confirmation biases within systems of personalized storytelling.

Conclusion

The integration of Artificial Intelligence into storytelling marks a significant shift in contemporary literary practice. By challenging established notions of authorship, creativity, and textual stability, AI introduces a hybrid mode of narrative production characterized by collaboration, generativity, and relational meaning-making. Critical frameworks such as Posthumanism and Reader-Response Theory illuminate how the boundaries between human and machine creativity are increasingly porous, reshaping both the production and reception of narrative texts. Literary works such as Ted Chiang's The Lifecycle of Software Objects exemplify these dynamics by foregrounding the emotional, ethical, and developmental complexities of human–AI relationships that resonate with real-world engagements with generative technologies.

While the incorporation of AI into storytelling raises legitimate concerns regarding bias, narrative fragmentation, and the projection of affect onto artificial agents, it simultaneously offers unprecedented opportunities for innovation. Generative systems extend narrative possibilities beyond linear and fixed forms, enabling non-linear structures, interactive environments, and adaptive storylines that evolve through reader engagement. This shift destabilizes traditional conceptions of originality and textual finality, as narratives become fluid processes rather than closed artifacts. Rather than diminishing human

creativity, AI functions as an enabling framework that expands creative agency and invites new modes of participation.

Ultimately, AI does not supplant the human storyteller but reconfigures storytelling as a distributed and evolving practice. The future of narrative will depend on how thoughtfully this hybrid creative ecosystem is shaped, ensuring that ethical responsibility, human values, and cultural diversity remain central to the evolving relationship between technology and literary expression.

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