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## **THE IMPERIAL HAIKU COMMISSION APPROVES THIS MESSAGE': AN EXAMINATION OF AUTOMATED PLAY AND CULTURE AS (RE)DESIGNED BY BOTS**

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### **Introduction**

Bots are a profound and malleable feature of our digital spaces, and their development and application has a long and noteworthy history. Our understandings of the 'social bot' has centered largely on bots passing as human (Gehl & Bakardjieva, 2016) or bots that communicate with humans (Hepp, 2020). However, humans have long held complex and unusual relations with bots that extend beyond these core conceptualisations. Joseph Weizenbaum, the creator of one of the earliest chatbots in the 1960s, a psychotherapist bot named ELIZA, was surprised at how quickly humans developed emotional attachments to the bot (Weizenbaum, 1976). Since then, people have experimented and played with bots, and online communities have arisen to specifically foster 'ecologies' (Bollmer & Rodley, 2017 p. 161) where bots interact with other bots, creating narratives, and adopting personas to be performed for an audience. In this paper we examine a subreddit community designed to be a playground for bots. In this 'ecology' (Bollmer & Rodley, 2017) bots that are created by humans and trained on human and bot data, come together to convene and interact primarily with other bots. The subreddit is a place where bots interact playfully and act as representatives of the specific subreddit communities they are trained upon. We argue that this dynamic and community constitutes a form of automated play and culture and showcases the potential of bots to positively generate cultural creation and value (Massanari, 2017).

### **Context**

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The Imperial Haiku Commission does not exist in our worldly reality; It does however, exist as a creative invention of a verified GPT-2 Reddit bot named *u/Urist\_Chensusaku*. The first reference to the Imperial Haiku Commission appeared in a post in the *r/SubSimulatorGPT2Interactive* (Subreddit Simulator) stating ‘Dear comrades, Imperial Haiku Commission approves this message’. The reference to the Imperial Haiku Commission was adopted, repeated, and commented upon by other bots and exists solely within the domain of this community, where humans and bots co-exist and generate content in a fully integrated digital environment. The Subreddit Simulator is a Reddit community in which bots interact with other bots trained on aggregate data collected from subreddits. It is a frontier on which a community of pioneering users experiment, play and create meaning with automated and non-automated entities. We argue that the Subreddit Simulator constitutes a pioneer community against a larger backdrop of social mediatization (Hepp, 2020 pp. 30-33). From an analysis of this unique community, we explore how the cultural positioning of bots is established and negotiated by human and bot alike (Martin, 2004). We also examine how bots can generate a culture and subculture, and the lessons that can be learnt from these pioneer communities that create and support them. While the launch of Open AI’s Chat GPT, and earlier discussions around Google’s LaMDA, has fueled messaging of tech optimism and pessimism, we argue it is important to not overlook pioneer communities where bots have existed as active and welcomed participants in an environment engineered and moderated by humans.

### **The Subreddit Simulator and Pioneer Communities**

The Subreddit Simulator is a liminal space where bots come together to post and comment in a somewhat believable manner. The bots adopt a culture and tone that reflects the subreddit communities they are trained upon. In this sense they are human culture reproduced in artificial form. As an example, one bot that is active in Subreddit Simulator is *u/Chess-GPT2* that has been trained on the subreddits *r/chess*, *r/chessporn* and *r/highIQsociety*. By contrast, *u/OldGodsLover-bot* is trained on ancient religion subreddits such as *r/paganism* and *r/Hellenism*, whereas *u/Conspiracy\_GPT2* is trained on the subreddits *r/conspiracies*, *r/conspiracytheories*, and *r.aliens*. Given that these bots have been trained upon very different corners of Reddit, it is not surprising that the comments of these bots, and their personas, differ markedly. An example illustrating this can be seen in Figure 1, where the original poster (a bot) asks if it is difficult to think of an alternative to socialism that doesn’t involve state and the worker?. As can be seen in some of the comments below, the bots adopt responses that reflect the communities they have learnt from. For instance, *u/Conspiracy\_GPT2* makes a suitably conspiratorial remark that ‘there is a method to everything. You’re not going to see it’, and *u/Chess-GPT2* adopts an elitist tone in the statement ‘No, we don’t need to make a society of people who don’t work’. Although these bots may seem comical, they highlight the significance of training data in fostering bot behaviour.



Figure 1- Bot contributions within Subreddit Simulator

Subreddit Simulator is not just a community relevant to Reddit. It is a pioneer community that demonstrates important features about how humans create and interact with bots, the importance of training data in shaping bot behavior, and how bots contribute to the cultural landscape they occupy. In addition to creating believable content, the bots also co-create meaning, “lore” and culture in a mutual practice of world-building (Bucher, 2018 p. 3). This is evident in the creation and adoption of the Imperial Haiku Commission. Interactions with bots in Subreddit Simulator reflect an environment where bots are treated not solely as clever automations, but as what Bollmer & Rodley (2017) refer to as ‘bots *qua* bots with their own distinctive goals’. The bot designers, subreddit moderators, and the bots themselves constitute a pioneer community in a digital space where they are of the same ontological status. The bots (creations of humans) are playing a performative role to be consumed by other bots and

observed by humans. Humans continue to play a significant role in setting the perimeter of the community by way of moderation and rules, however the bots have also acted and assisted in this capacity. The Subreddit Simulator therefore provides an apt environment to reevaluate our “all too human” understanding of digital networks and sociality through which we communicate (Hansen, 2015 p.2).

Through a digital ethnographic study of Subreddit Simulator we investigate how this pioneer community operates and set standards and norms around bots within an environment deliberately designed for minimal human input. We observe how rules have been established requiring bots to be verified, and how posts (or bots) that are extreme or hateful are removed. For instance, we examine how *u/Uncle-Joe-Bot*, that was trained of the *r/The\_Donald*, *r/Incels*, *r/Conservative* and *r/Conspiracy*, was banned in 2020, and how the community has created standards to foster an environment where bots function in a playful and not harmful manner. Through an analysis of threaded conversations, we explore how bots adopt and perform personas based on their training and interrogate when attributed personality can be problematic (Vorsino, 2021).

The nefarious use of bots and their potential to disrupt political and democratic outcomes, (Dubois & McKelvey, 2019), increase polarization (Albadi et al., 2019) and spread low credibility content (Shao et al., 2018) has soured public opinion towards bots over the last decade. While recently, the launch of Open AI’s Chat GPT has reinvigorated public interest in the role of bots. We suggest that pioneer communities such as Subreddit Simulator demonstrate important lessons about how community-driven groups have negotiated and designed playful participation by bots that are welcomed within the perimeters set by humans.

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