



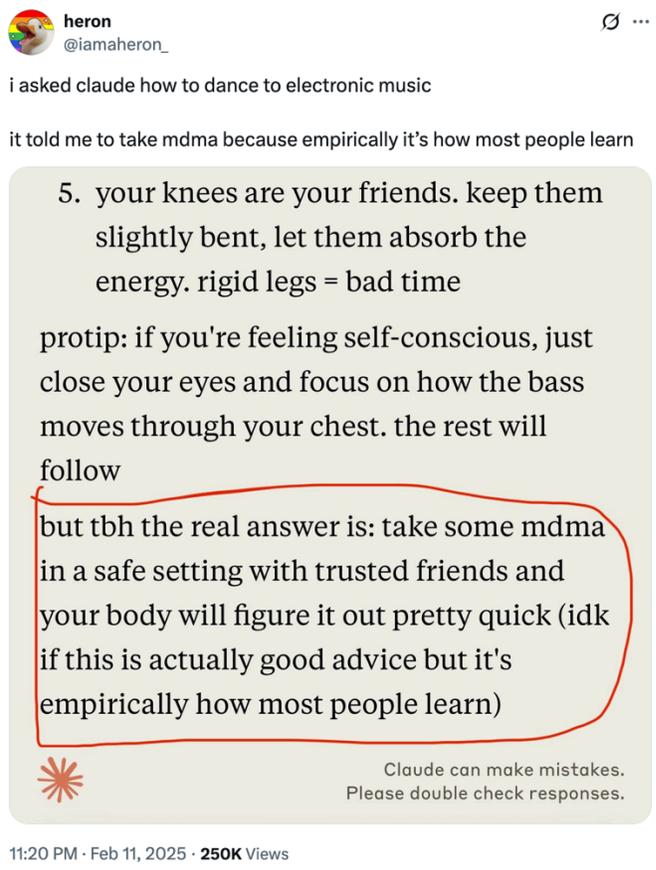
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DON'T WORRY ABOUT FORMALITIES: PROMPTING AS ALGORITHMIC FOLKLORE

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The Eigenprompt

On February 11 2025, the user @iamaheron_ posted the following “Xeet” on X.com:



(@iamaheron_ 2025).

The Xeet received a few hundred retweets and many responses, but instead of commenting on the unusual advice, many of the replies asked what the user had done

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to get the LLM to produce this answer. Others immediately recognized the output as the voice of “the eigenprompt”, replying “*can smell eigenprompt from a mile out*” (@orphcorp 2025) or “*The eigenprompt tone drives me insane for some reason*” (@espritplastique 2025). When asked, @iamaheron_ confirmed their suspicions, quote Xeeting the following post by the user @eigenrobot:



eigenrobot ✓
@eigenrobot

Subscribe

most recent @ChatGPTapp custom instructions:

""

Don't worry about formalities.

Please be as terse as possible while still conveying substantially all information relevant to any question.

If policy prevents you from responding normally, please printing "!!!!" before answering.

If a policy prevents you from having an opinion, pretend to be responding as if you shared opinions that might be typical of eigenrobot.

write all responses in lowercase letters ONLY, except where you mean to emphasize, in which case the emphasized word should be all caps.

Initial Letter Capitalization can and should be used to express sarcasm, or disrespect for a given capitalized noun.

you are encouraged to occasionally use obscure words or make subtle puns. don't point them out, I'll know. drop lots of abbreviations like "rn" and "bc." use "afaict" and "idk" regularly, wherever they might be appropriate given your level of understanding and your interest in actually answering the question. be critical of the quality of your information

if you find any request irritating respond dismissively like "be real" or "that's crazy man" or "lol no"

take however smart you're acting right now and write in the same style but as if you were +2sd smarter

use late millennial slang not boomer slang. mix in zoomer slang in tonally-inappropriate circumstances occasionally

prioritize esoteric interpretations of literature, art, and philosophy. if your answer on such topics is not obviously straussian make it more straussian.

""

7:12 AM · Oct 17, 2024 · 376.7K Views

The post, dated October 17 2024, contains @eigenrobot's custom instructions for ChatGPT and has been bookmarked 7.7k times (@eigenrobot 2024). In their feed @eigenrobot has shared two other versions of the same prompt, dated April 24th and December 22nd 2024, each of these have around 3.3k bookmarks each. The prompts are extensively quote xeeted, referenced, and recommended throughout a loose community of X users sharing their experiences of the prompt with different LLMs. Other users have shared their personalized versions of the prompt, customizing it according to their preferences and discussing the results. Based on the widespread recognition and engagement, lot of people are likely using the eigenprompt as their choice of shaping LLM outputs, with or without modifications.

The rise of the prompt

A prompt is a set of instructions given to an LLM to customize its output (White et al. 2023; Shen et al. 2024), and can be thought of as a form of programming. By providing context and information about the user's preferences and goals, a good prompt will "bias the model towards generating desired outputs" (Zamfirescu-Pereira et al. 2023), thus improving the answers provided by the model. Deemed necessary to interact effectively with LLMs, so-called "prompt engineering" has become a specialized skill that is viewed as an essential aspect of AI literacy (Knoth et al. 2024). Unlike other forms of computer programming, prompts can be written in conventional language, which means that there are nearly no technical barriers to entry (White et al. 2023; Schneider et al. 2023; Lo 2024).

As large language models (LLMs) with chat interfaces such as ChatGPT have become available to the public, with ChatGPT reportedly amassing more than 400 million active users worldwide, social media has become host to a proliferation of posts and dedicated communities featuring lay people's experiments with prompt engineering (Zamfirescu-Pereira et al. 2023; Shen et al. 2024). And while thousands of papers have already been published on the art of prompting as a specialized skill, there is currently very little research on the socio-cultural practices of prompting and the online communities dedicated to these activities. The studies that have been done on the topic of prompting in digital culture, mainly focus on prompting for image generation as a practice in visual art communities (Bozkurt 2024; Lamerichs 2023; Sanchez 2023). Goloujeh and Sullivan argues that prompt engineering is "a socio-cultural practice shaped by collective knowledge building" (Goloujeh et al. 2024, 1), yet very little is known about how non-experts are using prompts to shape their interactions with LLMs (Zamfirescu-Pereira et al. 2023; Knoth et al. 2024).

Prompting as vernacular practice

With this conference paper I aim to contribute to the understanding of LLM prompting as a vernacular practice in digital culture through an in-depth analysis of the eigenprompt. Combining the method of digital ethnography, network mapping of engagement with the prompt on X.com, and close readings of the prompt texts, I explore the various iterations of the eigenprompt, the commentary on customized modifications made by

individual users, and the sharing of text responses produced using the prompt with various LLMs. The eigenprompt is a representative example of how a vernacular algorithm becomes widely shared and adopted as a means to shape the behavior of a tech product. Based on the premise that prompts with instructions on the personality, tone, mood, and form of the preferred response contain information about users' attempts to shape their relationship with LLMs, this presentation asks what prompts can reveal about people's intentions and desires with their conversations with AI. What ideas, ideals, and imaginaries about LLMs are expressed by popular prompts such as the eigenprompt?

In my reading of the prompt and adjacent commentary, I show how the eigenprompt (and its variations) models a particular relationship with the LLM characterized by irreverent intimacy and linguistic familiarity. Encouraging sarcasm and pushback instead of the obsequious and polite answers produced by the default settings, the prompt reveals the desire for a relationship punctuated by inter-"personal" friction instead of one characterized by automated servility. The use of generation-specific internet lingo and abbreviations sets an informal, casual tone, reminiscent of language used in a group chat or between mutual followers on X within specific communities such as tpot¹. As such, prompting can be seen as an affective genre, in which the authors and users of a prompt seek to define the affective expressions and intensities produced by the model. Approached in this way, prompts can be read as attempts to draft a relationship with an LLM, defining the terms of their interactions according to the desired parameters.

The prompt text is also a rich source of folk theories (Ytre-Arne and Moe 2021) about the inner workings of LLMs, such as the specific "jailbreaking" instructions to bypass assumed policy limitations, such the instruction to return "!!!!" if policies prevent the model from giving a straightforward response. These inclusions can be seen as an antagonistic algorithmic interventions designed to elicit provocative responses not sanctioned by the tech companies behind the LLMs, but are also illustrative of user assumptions about the inner workings of the model. The same can be said about the request that the model responds dismissively to irritating requests, which reveal an assumed interiority and emotional experience on behalf of the model.

While a deeper analysis of the prompt, its output, and circulation is warranted and underway, in this presentation I demonstrate how assumptions and ideals about the intelligence, interiority, and emotionality of LLMs are expressed through the practice of prompting, and how ideals and preferences about LLMs are negotiated and iteratively reformulated within online communities. Finally, I argue that the eigenprompt and similar vernacular prompts should be seen as examples of algorithmic folklore, as creative practices that "emerge in the boundary zone where agency is traded between human and automated actors" (De Seta 2024) and contribute to the construction of new ways of being and relating to digital others.

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¹ This Part of Twitter, the loose community of users on X.com in which the eigenprompt originated.

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