

**STORIES
FOR THE
FUTURE ▶
2024**

STORIES FOR THE FUTURE

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FORWARD

In 2013, Spike Jonze released *Her*, a film about a man who falls in love with his personified AI operating system. A little over a decade later, during the release of GPT-4o’s feminine, almost flirtatious voice mode, Sam Altman [tweeted](#) “her,” linking the two. Jonze’s uncanny rendering of an AI agent had come to fruition. This is just one example of how science and speculative fiction become part of the collective consciousness and tangibly impact technological development. Films in particular can be seen as [diegetic prototypes](#), providing audiences with the physical, psychological, and social context of yet undiscovered scientific innovations.

Today, the most popular sci-fi narratives about AI—*Her*, *The Terminator*, *2001: The Space Odyssey*—return to the same limiting tropes that pit humans against an anthropomorphized machine. These are the types of stories that influence research and policy. While debating autonomous weapons during a disarmament campaign in 2012, [policymakers](#) referenced *The Terminator*. A search for HAL 900 on Google Scholar surfaces multiple computer science [research papers](#) aiming to “build HAL.” In bringing machines to life and pitting them against other characters, these films anchor us in increasingly dated form-factors, hierarchies, and language around AI.

The space of possible outcomes in AI is infinitely more complex and vast than what we see in Hollywood today. We have language models that can [decode](#) whale sounds, small models for [music creation](#), new techniques for [identifying](#) machine generated text, agents that can [simulate](#) small societies, language models more [persuasive](#) than the average human. Each of these pieces of research point to a way of reassessing our relationship with AI and of expanding our horizon of possible futures.



We wondered: what happens when technical and creative experts collaborate to imagine forward-looking narratives about AI. Could we break entrenched patterns? Scientists live 10 years in the future, but it’s creatives who, unencumbered by technical details, often have unexpected musings to the question: where might technology lead us?

We invited 11 sci-fi filmmakers and AI researchers to Stanford for Stories for the Future, our day-and-a-half experiment in fostering new narratives about AI. Researchers shared perspectives on AI and filmmakers reflected on the challenges of writing AI narratives. Together researcher-writer pairs transformed a research paper into a written scene. The challenge? Each scene had to include an AI manifestation, but could not be about the personhood of AI or AI as a threat.

In the rest of this booklet, you can find a participant list and convening agenda, workshop design approach and prompts to help facilitate similar events, the final written scenes (conceived and created in under three hours), and reflections on next steps. Our hope is that this work will be inspiring to others who want to foster collaboration between creatives and scientists and are curious about narratives as a means for imagining—and creating—the future.





PEOPLE

PARTICIPANTS



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Writer/Filmmaker



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Writer/ Filmmaker



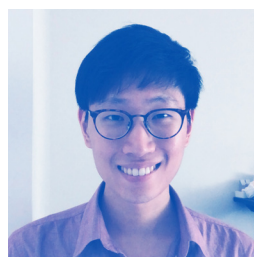
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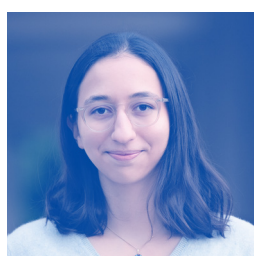


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DESIGN APPROACH

Participants

Our goal was to invite participants with a curiosity about AI as a subject and storytelling as a medium. We looked for storytellers with a history of interrogating technology in their work, whether through writing sci-fi narratives or experimentation with new tools, and researchers with an interest in societal impact.

Expectation Setting

In bringing together AI researchers and filmmakers, we needed to be cognizant of their different concerns. This convening was explicitly not about AI tools for creative work—no one used foundation models for writing or ideation. We crafted the following norms to facilitate interdisciplinary work and set the tone for the convening:

1. Being uncertain is okay. We’re here to learn and view our work in a new lens.
2. Today is a day for questions and play. As a creative, you’ll be diving into technical concepts. As a researcher, you’ll be thinking narratively. Just try it on.
3. Lean into each other’s expertise and your own. Something that may be obvious to you might not be obvious to someone else.

Design Principles

1. Interdisciplinary work requires an environment where people in the room lean into their own expertise while witnessing and engaging in the expertise of others. The researchers were experts in AI. The filmmakers were experts in storytelling. From a design lens, AI became the core content of the workshop, while narrative became the core methodology. Each set of experts was given an opportunity to be a leader within the context of the convening.
2. Productive discomfort is good. In learning science, there are three zones of learning: comfort, stretch, and panic. Stories for the Future was designed with the goal of introducing new provocations and pushing participants to think and create in new ways. Discomfort, the stretch zone of learning, is a natural part of that experience.
3. The core of the convening is not the research or the writing, but the participants themselves. How can we encourage participants to get to know each other beyond their roles as researchers and writers?



WORKSHOP FORMAT & PROMPTS

Morning Session

During the morning session, researchers shared AI provocations and filmmakers discussed the challenges of writing AI narratives. These presentations seeded ideas for the afternoon workshop and covered a range of topics including:

- Giant Brains, Then & Now (Professor Fred Turner)
- Exploring the Societal Impacts of Language Models: Insights Into Representation, Persuasion, and their Impact on Democratic Processes (Dr. Esin Durmus)
- Generative Agents: Interactive Simulacra of Human Behavior (Joon Park)
- Building Machines that Understand People (Kanishk Gandhi)
- Mechanisms and Metaphors for Interaction with AI (Dr. John Thickstun)
- Fictional Machines: Use and Abuse of AI Confabulations in Creative Processes (Celeste Betancur)

Afternoon Session

In our afternoon session, participants had three-and-a-half hours to translate a research concept to a story featuring AI. An afternoon is not nearly enough time for a substantial piece of writing. None of the scenes that came out of the workshop are final pieces. Our intent was to plant seeds for stories and imagine the future implications of research.

We paired one researcher with one filmmaker for the entire afternoon session. Each researcher brought a research paper of theirs as the starting point for the session. The structure was as follows:

- **Futures Wheels.** Each pair identified the core concept of the research paper provided and made a list of 1st and 2nd order consequences.
- **World building.** Each story requires a world. Pairs choose one of the above consequences and built a world around it.
- **Scene writing.** Using the world and characters created, pairs wrote a scene in which AI was featured but the scene could not be about the personhood of AI or AI as a threat.

In the following section, we share our prompts for each portion of the workshop.



Futures Wheels: Part 1 [10 minutes]

Tell your partner about the research paper or research idea you brought in today. We'll be using this paper as the basis for explorations of potential futures. As you're talking about the research, think about the central tension or realization of the paper. Some research identifies an issue or question for further exploration; some research provides a very specific technical contribution or answer to a problem.

What is the central tension of the paper? How does this build on previous work? What does this research reveal? What are the stakes?

Futures Wheels: Part 2 [10 minutes]

We'll be building futures wheels to interrogate the first and second order effects of the research just discussed.

- First order effect: What is a direct consequence of this work on society?
- Second order effect: What is a second order effect based on those results?

As you come up with effects, consider the consequences on labor, relationships, governance, critical infrastructure (energy, food, transport), human-machine interaction, communication, culture, technology, and further research.



World Building: Orientation

When people think of world building, they think of fantasy, sci-fi, dystopia, Game of Thrones, Pandora, Star Wars, Inside Out – a universe so far away that it requires detail at every level – political, social, economic, interpersonal, personal – to feel lived in. We relish the immersion in a richly invented culture.

When I teach world-building, I talk instead about the “arena” we’re playing in – the specific slice of life, the attitude of the world, the sub-culture. You do not need to invent everything – you can, of course. But what’s more important is to explore how people function and interact in this world. What are the rules of how people can and must behave, and how do those rules manifest themselves?

We’re going to approach this in two parts, starting more globally and then moving to the information as channeled through an individual.

Part 1: The World of the World [10 minutes]

Pick a scribe among your pair. Choose one direct consequence and its indirect consequences. For three minutes, brainstorm other elements adjacent to it. What most immediately comes to mind about the manifestations of these consequences?

- Economic. How does this manifest in economic systems?
- Social. What roles do people play in this world? How does this manifest in social, religious or cultural practices? In political systems?
- Familial. How does this manifest in family structures or dynamics?
- Travel. How might this manifest in the ways people navigate the world physically?
- Entertainment. How do people amuse themselves?

Part 2: The Person in the World [10 minutes]

Now imagine a character who is in this world, who has a place in it and a struggle in it. I sometimes say a protagonist is a problem walking around waiting to be solved (or at least catalyzed). Who is both in this world and unsettled by it?

A character can then be motivated either by their own need/goal or by a specific problem thrust upon them. I discuss it like a vector: A character always starts from a position and acts out in a particular direction. (They are eventually buffeted by contrary forces, which are embodied as antagonists.)

Brainstorm a character who is in this world and who develops a goal, need, or problem to solve. It might help to identify a companion and/or an antagonist as well. Name them! Write one sentence to sum up the person and their problem in the world.

Scene Building [40 minutes]

“A story is two truths coming together and one being changed by it.” - Nina Foch.

Write a 3 page scene/sequence that includes a human character and an AI agent, process, character, or manifestation. This could include two humans using AI somehow or an embodied AI character.

This scene could be from the world you just created or something separate. It should not be about the personhood of the AI or the AI as a threat (or humans as a threat to the AI’s personhood.)

You can write a scene directly inspired by your previous work here – take the protagonist and goal that you’ve worked on and put them into a scene-level problem. Or you can create an entirely new scene and story based on anything we’ve heard today.

First, discuss the contours of the scene: Who is in it, what the situation of the scene is, who wants what, the dynamics, etc. Then, write the scene, literally write the dialogue, action, interaction. Screenwriters will be the scribes here.





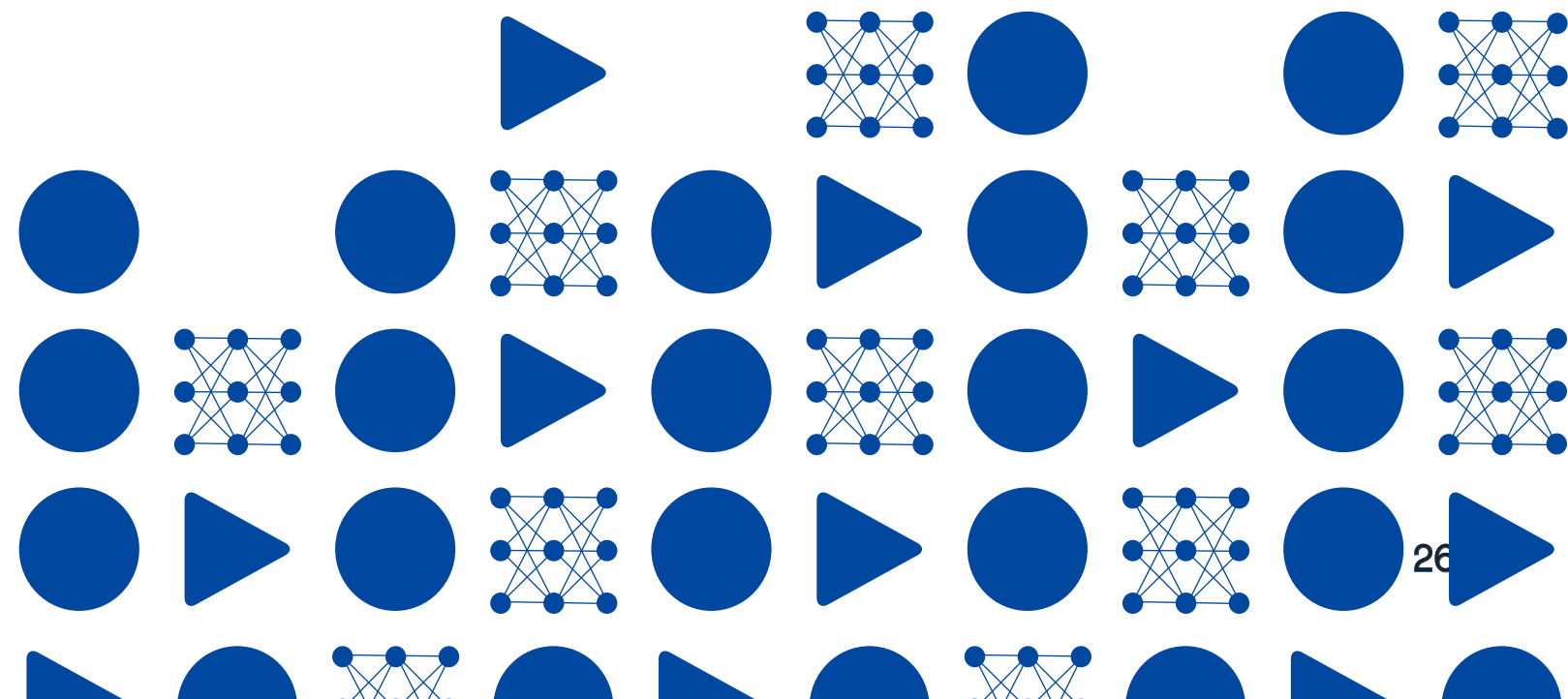
CREATIVE WORK

MAINTAINERS OF EMPTYNESS

ALEXANDER WEINSTEIN & FRED TURNER

In a techno-utopian world where machine systems have replaced politicians, and polyamory has replaced the nuclear family, Ola dreams of solitary couple-hood and the retrograde pleasures of monogamy beneath the eyes of her online home.

[Inspired by '[Machine Politics](#)' (2019), an essay by Fred Turner.]



Tonight, I told Bob that I love him, I told Janis that I love her, gave her a goodnight kiss, I told Jerome and Beach that I love them, which I do, and when I kissed Nubes goodnight, Nubes who shares our bed tonight, the two of us alone post mediation, I lingered longer. Here’s what I haven’t told anyone, sometimes when we fantasize, when he whispers in my ear as we hold one another, we role play we’re a single-family house. I come home from work, and he’s already made dinner. He looks incredibly hot in his apron and wedding ring. The voices of others from the day fall away, and I hear only his. We practice looking into each other’s eyes. He touches my shoulder as if he wants to waltz, and I feel a shiver. I’m not sure I want to go that far. But I do imagine white painted walls that don’t change color.

“Tell me about how wrong it would be to cuddle up under the blanket, a bowl of popcorn, watching a movie that only we want to watch,” I tell him. And he goes further, tells me about single-serve containers.

There’s no way we’re going to be interrupted, we don’t have River, Avian, Stream, or Ocean among us, there’s also none of my students practicing Relinquishment Lessons and working on their cuddle puddles—in our fantasy we’re actually in a one-bedroom apartment where rent is overdue.

“Sometimes we actually hear neighbors through the wall,” he whispers to me.

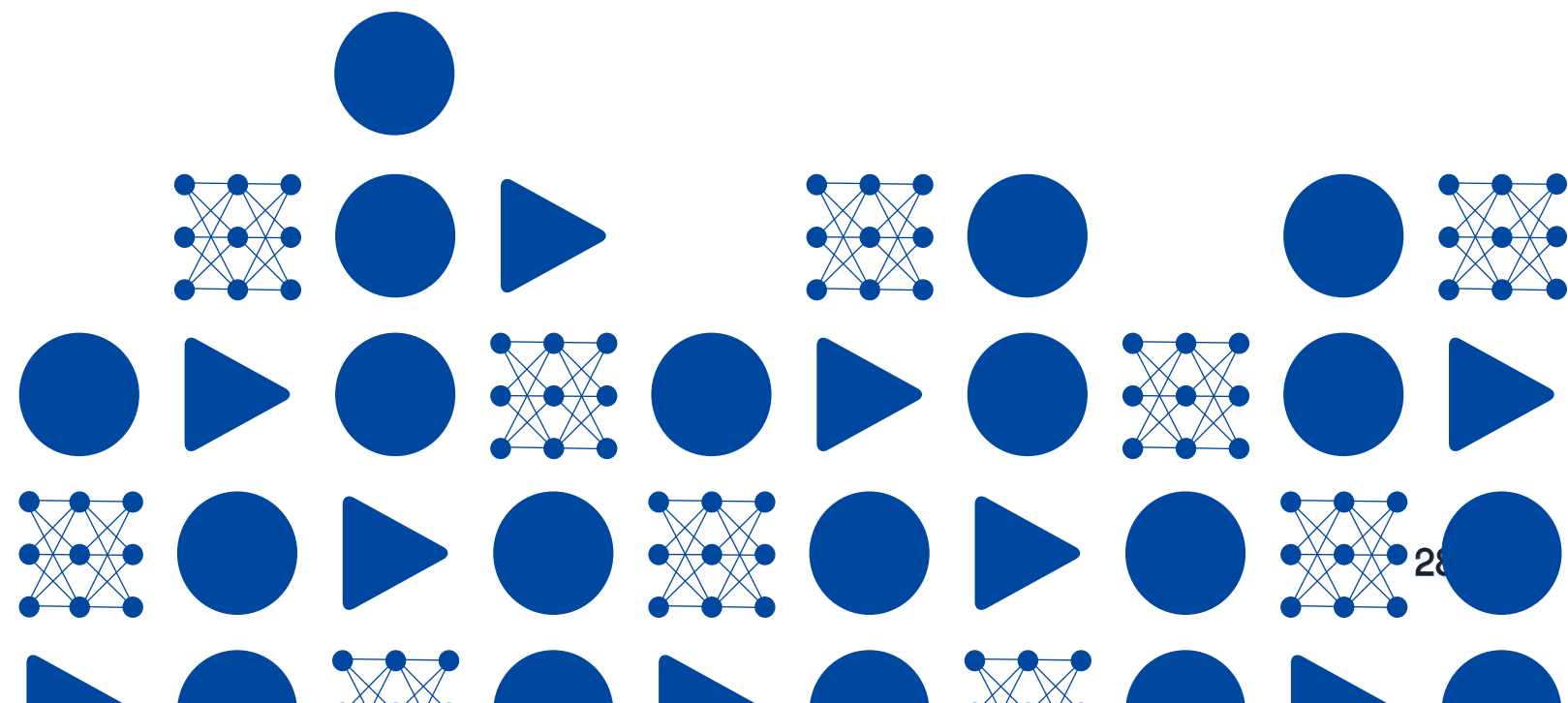
Afterwards, we both feel guilty. The walls have picked up on our wayward thoughts and have begun to undulate a chilly blue. The wall shows us an image of the past. Valentine’s Day, the tables in a restaurant populated by couples, each of them staring into one another’s eyes, each of them eating their individual orders.

Outside the windows someone stands asking for money. Music is playing it’s a solo singer-songwriter. We no longer listen to the music of exclusion, the brilliant solo, the geniuses.

CONNIE IS NOT OKAY!

WALTER WOODMAN & KANISHK GANDHI

In a world where everyone is self actualized and satisfied, “Okay, Connie”
is suddenly not okay.



EXT. OKAYHOMA - DAY

Okayhoma, a town so perfect it looks like it is made of plastercine.

NARRATOR

This is Okayhoma. A world where everything is ok.

There has been many worlds - we tried precisely 4,567,953 worlds and we found Okayhoma to be the perfect balance of everything.

Nobody feels discomfort because we have mathematically proven the best course of action for every single facet of life.

INT. OFFICE - DAY

Jane is talking to her BOSS.

BOSS

I am sorry Jane - it's just not working out between you and Do-Well. While you were an adequate employee - you were simply not adequate enough.

JANE

That's ok. I completely agree.

INT. RESTERAUNT - DAY

LIAM is being broken up with by SARAH.

SARAH

Liam unfortunately you do not satisfy me sexually.

For a moment Liam looks hurt. But extends his hand for a hand shake.

LIAM

That's ok. I am not adequate. I will lower standards and find someone new.

2.

INT. STARBUCKS - DAY

BARISTA
This order is for Boob.

BOB
My name is actually bob but that's
ok. I will now exclusively be known
as boob.

NARRATOR
Everything was OK until that one
day.

EXT. CONNIE'S HOUSE - DAY

Connie wakes up in her very ok house. Her alarm goes off
playing TAYLOR SWIFT on the TAYLOR SWIFT only radio station.

NARRATOR
That was the day I decided to shake
things up. (whispers)

IT'S NOT OK.

Connie is jolted awake.

CONNIE
What was that.

NARRATOR
And with that small push. Connie's
world became not ok. Or at the very
least she began noticing it.

Connie gets out of bed. She stubs her toe.

CONNIE
OWWW FUCK. It's ok. Probably my
fault. A lesson I needed to learn.

Connie is in the shower. The hot water is not working.

CONNIE (CONT'D)
It's ok. I will assume this is to
stimulate my blood vessels and wake
me up.

Connie heads downstairs. Her girlfriend DEBROAH comes
downstairs.

3.

DEBROAH
How's it going babe.

CONNIE
Yeah...ok.

Debroah feels pained. Connie has burnt the toast yet again.
She scrapes butter onto the blackened bread.

DEBROAH
Listen, Con. We need to talk. I've
run 100 similuations and there is
no way this relationship is going
to work out. I've packed your stuff
and you'll be moving in with your
parents...ok?

Connie thinks for a moment.

CONNIE
No, it's not ok.

Debroah has never heard these words before.

INT. WORK - DAY

Connie is sat across from her boss. She looks disheveled she
has had the first horrible morning of her life.

BOSS
Connie. Everything ok.

Connie sighs. She nods and smiles.

BOSS (CONT'D)
Great. So we're going to be firing
you today. After you didn't attend
the non-mandatory silent disco yoga
team building event. We decided to
run a couple simulations of how
well you fit in at Do-Well. And
unfortunately, it was slim but it
never worked out. Ok?

CONNIE
NO. NOT OK.

EXT. OKAYHOMA - CONT'D

The worst day ever continues. It's raining. A car drives by
splashing a puddle on her. Somehow a seagull shits on her
shoulder.

4.

INT. STARBUCKS - DAY

Connie looks like hell. She gets up to order from the chipper ZAZ.

CONNIE
I need a caramel macchiato. PLEASE
don't forget the whip. I need it
today.

ZAZ
Absolutely no problem. What's the
name for the order.

CONNIE
Connie.

Zaz writes on the cup.

ZAZ
Your order will be ready over there
conroy!

As connie is paying an iPad asks her to rate her expierence 1
being Ok - 5 being Ok.

Moments later they call out an order for CONROY.

Connie takes her drink it has no whipcream on it.

CONNIE
Excuse me. Theres no whipcream on
this.

ZAZ
Yeah we ran the simulation and
(look at Connie) we decided you
didn't need it. Ok?

Connie grabs the cup and whips it at the barista.

CONNIE
NO IT'S NOT O-FUCKING KAY.

Connie begins to have an absolute meltdown. She is throwing
other peoples drinks.

CONNIE (CONT'D)
ARE YOU OK? IS THIS OK? YOU OK WITH
THIS.

Connie goes totally postal. People take out their cellphones
and film. After her meltdown Connie leaves the starbucks in a
huff.

5.

Zaz wipes Macchiato off his apron.

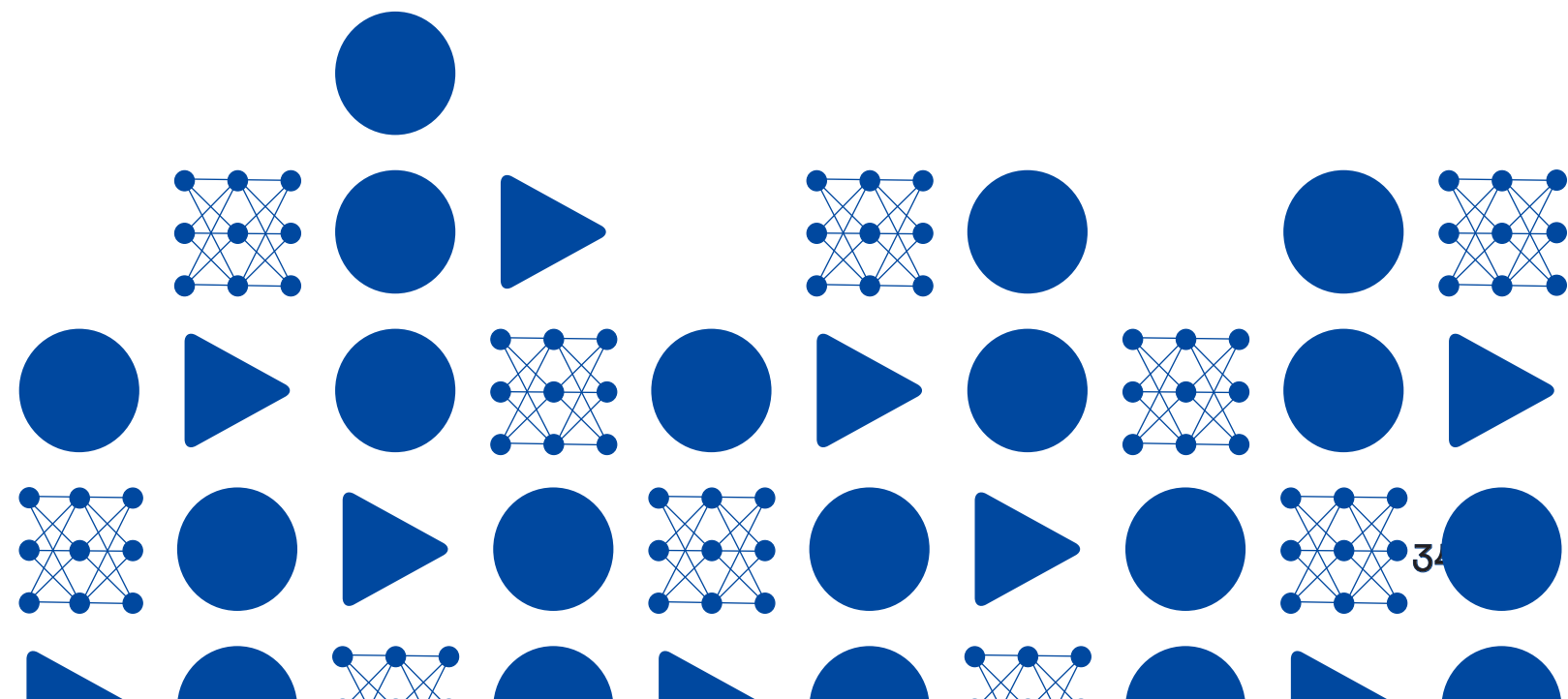
ZAZ
OoooooKAY.

SAM

SOPHIE BARTHES & JOHN THICKSTUN

Sam is a business intelligence analyst at ClosedAI in 2124, in a world where everyone relies on (watermarked) AI technology to assist their writing. One day, Sam discovers a mysterious document with no identifiable watermark written— unbeknownst to Sam—by a writer practicing the ancient art of unassisted writing.

[Inspired by ‘[Robust Distortion-free Watermarks for Language Models](#)’ (2024), a research paper by R. Kuditipudi, J. Thickstun, T. Hashimoto and P. Liang.]



INT. ANALYSTS ROOM - "CLOSED AI" HEADQUARTERS - PALO ALTO -
DAY - 2124

A group of YOUNG ANALYSTS are busy swiping on giant screens a
succession WATERMARKED DOCUMENTS (COLORFULLY HIGHLIGHTED
TEXTS).

At his desk SAM, late twenties, his swiping mechanically but
efficiently the texts he receives on his monitor.

A BLACK TEXT POPS on his monitor. Sam stares at it, confused.
He checks on his colleagues monitors. They don't have this
issue. He turns to his colleague.

SAM
Hey, check this out...

COLLEAGUE # 1
Never seen this...

He pocks another colleague.

COLLEAGUE#2
What's up? Try rebooting...

Sam reboots the software. The BLACK TEXT pops up gain. He
stares at it in disbelief.

SAM
Wow, it's unmarked...

COLLEAGUE # 1
That's not possible...

COLLEAGUE# 2
Maybe it's a new Model...

SAM
What do you mean a new Model?

COLLEAGUE# 2
Like not in the system yet.

COLLEAGUE # 1
How is that possible?

Sam and colleagues look utterly confused.

COLLEAGUE # 1 (CONT'D)
You should call the boss.

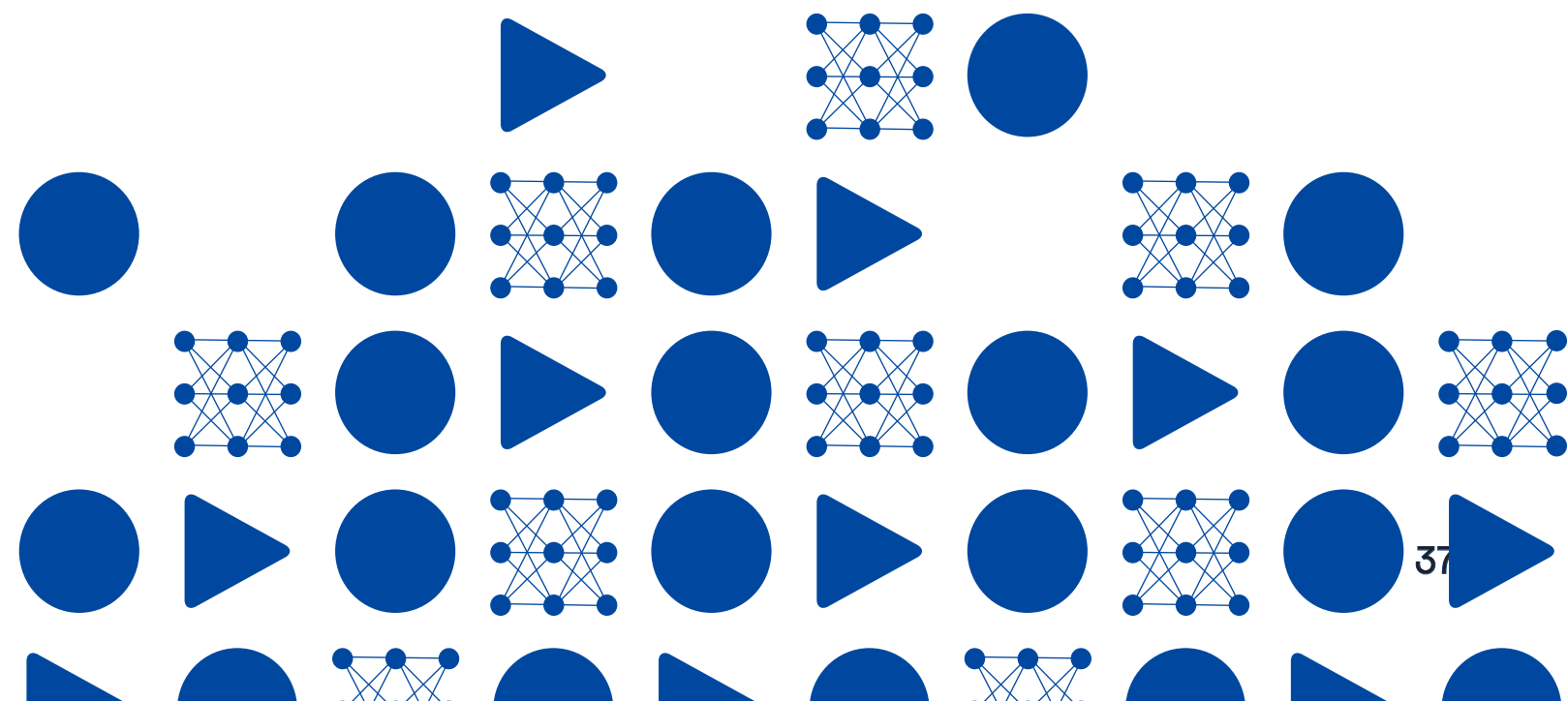
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Sam and his Boss are staring listlessly, at the screen.

UNTITLED

CELESTE BETANCUR

A brilliant VR sculptress cannot get anyone to see her art because she lives in a world where everyone exists in their own isolated VR universe. When her work is stolen in a digital marketplace showing, she is compelled to leave her apartment for the first time ever in order to find the culprit and get her creation back.



She, SAMMY, is PISSED. She "comes back" to her apartment—which we see as real with a VR overlay.

1 INT.SAMMY'S APARTMENT REAL AND IMAGINED. DAY. 1

Calls up her digital assistant, who is voiced by Megan Ryan from 1988.

SAMMY
(In disbelief)
It's gone...

MEG RYAN (V.O.)
(Chipper)
How much did they buy it for?
SAMMY
They didn't — they stole it — I think... I think I was robbed! I've never been robbed. Can you find them again? Who was it?

MEG RYAN (V.O.)
(Even more chipper)
I can't answer those questions.
May I help with something else?

SAMMY
Just tell me where they live — I'll talk to them —

MEG RYAN (V.O.)
I can't answer those questions.
Wouldn't you rather just make a new sculpture. You're sculptress!
You love sculpting! Go sculpt!

SAMMY
(Despondent)
That piece was special.

MEG RYAN (V.O.)
I'm sorry, I can't answer those questions. Referring you to government help desk.

A DIGITAL AVATAR APPEARS. She looks just like MEG RYAN FROM 1988. Preferences well logged. She is impersonal, but polite.

SAMMY
Thank you! I was robbed and I need help!

MEG RYAN
What's your name?

2.

SAMMY

Sammy.

MEG RYAN

Your name please?

SAMMY

Sammy.

MEG RYAN

Name please!

SAMMY

(Annoyed)

Samantha Smith KD76-LLC.

MEG RYAN

Ok. We're currently having trouble with connections. How can I confirm your ID?

SAMMY

I'm here! It's me! Look, I just need help finding someone. I met him in a digital marketplace -

MEG RYAN

I'm sorry, you are not cleared for IRL locations.

SAMMY

That's bullshit -

MEG RYAN

(Sweetly, like only Meg Ryan can)

I'm sorry, this conversation is terminated due to use of an obscenity. I love you.

Meg Ryan disappears.

Sammy, in frustration, takes off her VR glasses and smashes them. A moment as she adjusts to not wearing her glasses. Perhaps for the first time in a long time.

SAMMY

Fine-I'll find the fucker myself-

She opens her front door-to find-A CUTE LITTLE DELIVERY ROBOT already approaching. The robot's flip top opens and out comes... A NEW PAIR OF VR GLASSES.

CUTE LITTLE SERVICE BOT

You broke your glasses in error.

(MORE)

3.

CUTE LITTLE SERVICE BOT (CONT'D)
Here's some new ones!

CLOSE ON SAMMY. Anger gives her wings. She takes a first step
out of her apartment.



LOOKING FORWARD

Stories for the Future began as an initiative to imagine new narratives about AI, ones that could point us towards a forward-looking vision of this technology. Ultimately, it allowed us to pilot collaboration between scientists and creatives, experiment with using narrative as a mechanism for extending research into a tangible future, and confront the question of whether it is possible to tell compelling stories about AI in which it is not an antagonist.

Telling Stories about AI

Characters, worlds, and interaction help put innovation in context, but a good story requires conflict. In the scenes from Stories for the Future, AI manifests as a frustrating chatbot-like agent standing in the way of justice, a new kind of writing culture that the protagonist may rally against, an algorithmically perfect world, and the impetus for society’s retreat into isolation. AI is not explicitly an antagonist, but it justifies the tension in these worlds.

This small sample of scenes suggest that writing forward-looking narratives about AI requires more than introducing new material about the topic (e.g., the papers shared by the researchers). It requires discovering narrative drivers—romance, coming of age, adventure, mystery—that do not rely on AI being an antagonist. Or, as Alexander Weinstein proposed, perhaps it is possible to depart from traditional narrative structures and imagine “stories of awe” in which we approach technology with open-heartedness.

The Pitfall of Avoiding Dystopias

During the writing workshop, participants tackled the challenge of writing a scene that included a human character and an AI agent, but was not about the personhood of the AI or the AI as a threat. The premise of our convening was to discover futures with AI that we want to head towards, but this framing, which avoids dystopias, raised the concern of propagandizing AI through positive narratives. It is clear that AI will have negative consequences; our reason for creating space for imagining alternatives to the status quo, many of which are dystopias, is a belief in the power of stories to shape our future and a need for new visions for what that might be.

Writing Exercises as Speculative Design

While we originally conceived of the writing workshop as a way to generate stories about AI, researchers came away from the speculative design and narrative writing exercises with a new perspective on their work. Kanishk Gandhi, reflecting on the workshop’s impact, explained that it helped him think about his research “in the limit,” imagining both the promising and concerning possibilities of his work.

Fostering Interdisciplinary Collaboration

Stories for the Future was a space apart—filmmakers and AI researchers rarely sit side-by-side, let alone to collaborate. The convening provided an opportunity to create a shared language and understanding across disciplines. One researcher commented on the impressive speed with which writers pulled stories together and bridged fact into fiction. A writer, on the other hand, commented on being inspired by meeting researchers on the front-lines of human-centered AI research.

What Next?

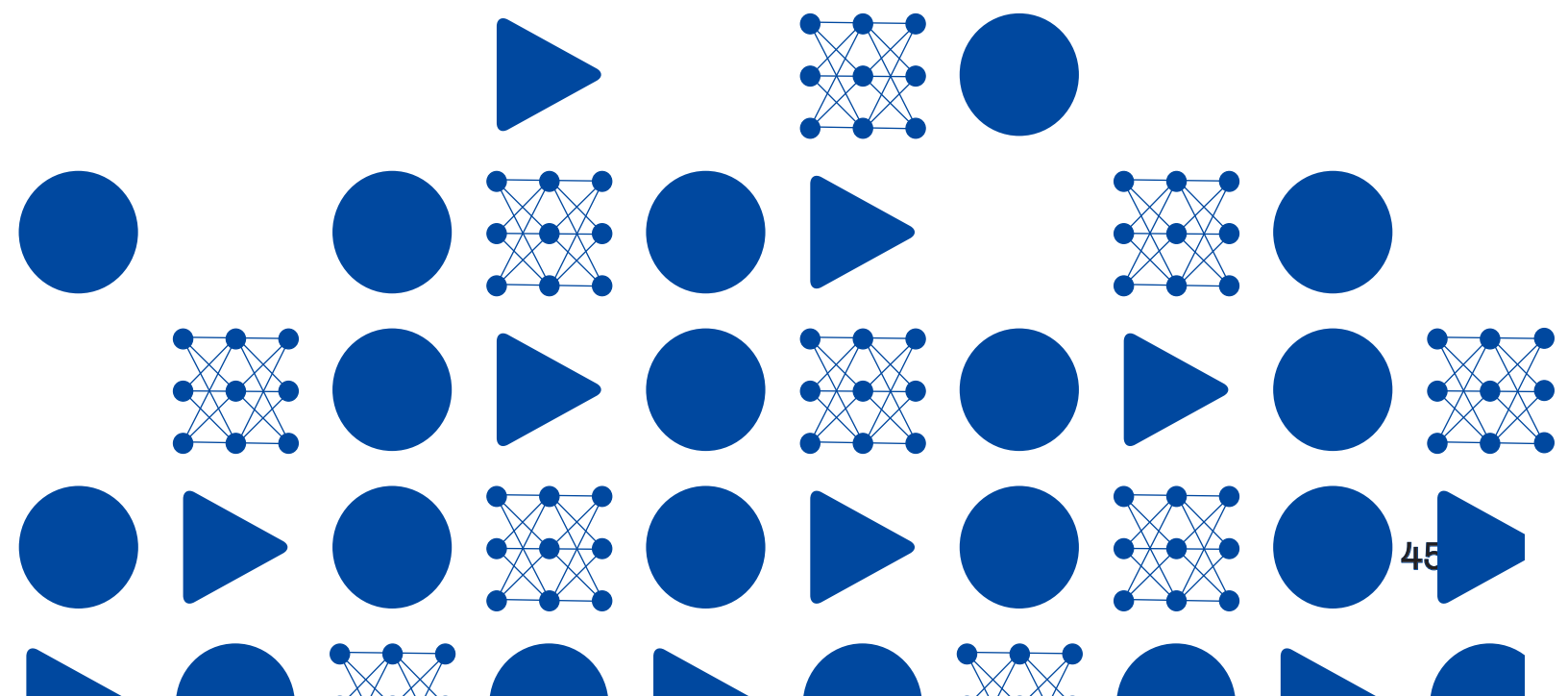
We hope that *Stories for the Future* serves as an example for other researchers, designers, institutes, and storytellers interested in facilitating collaboration between creatives and scientists. We provide all the prompts for the workshop portion of the convening in this booklet so that they can be replicated in other settings. This work could also be expanded to support the development of new AI narratives or explore new avenues for using storytelling within research contexts. Some possibilities include:

1. A multi-year program with researcher-filmmaker pairs meeting twice yearly to collaborate on new narratives. *Stories for the Future* was a one and a half day event, but fostering true collaboration and developing a new language between disciplines requires more time.
2. A commissioned anthology of the next generation of sci-fi stories about AI. The scenes written at the workshop were just seeds of ideas, but with more attention could turn into full stories or scripts.
3. Collaboration with AI research labs to bring speculative design and narrative exercises into lab planning meetings. At *Stories for the Future*, writing scenes about AI provided researchers with a chance to reconsider the impact of their research and imagine new future work.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

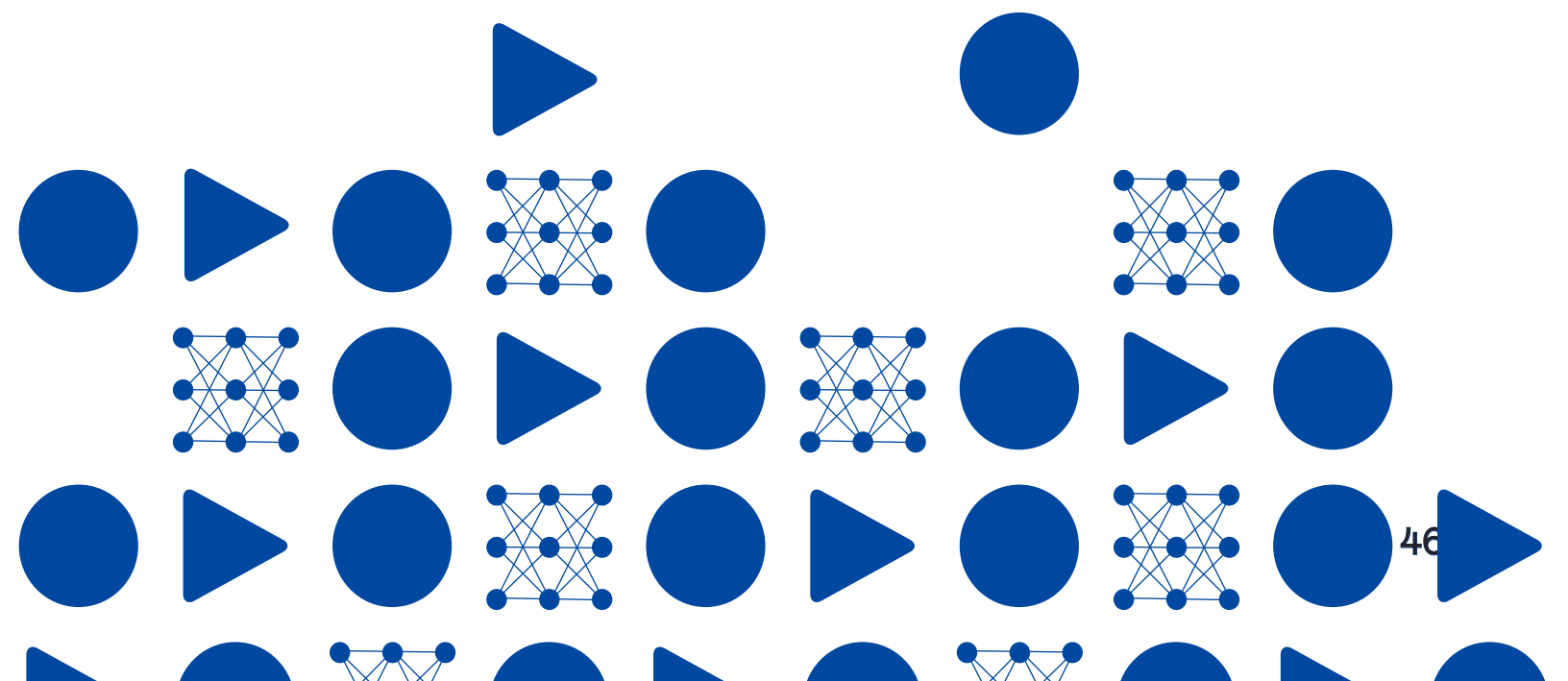
This research was the result of a community of support and collaboration—we are thankful for the large group of people who made the convening a reality. Thank you to Stanford’s Institute for Human-Centered AI for supporting this project through the Seed Grant program. To Vanessa Parli for support throughout the project and especially for providing early encouragement and feedback during the grant writing process. To Professor Michele Elam for being an early supporter and bringing the critical lens of the humanities to AI.

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THANK
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