



Critical AI (Duke University Press) call for papers

Virtuality, Embodiment, and Meaning-Making in AI Technologies

Open Access special cluster edited by Alexa Alice Joubin

This special issue cluster calls on contributors to reflect specifically on the conditions for (and of) meaning-making, inside and outside the mediation of gen AI technologies, as a social activity at the intersection of *embodiment* and *virtuality*. A guiding research question for the special cluster asks what it means to interact with automated chatbots as distinct from interactions with characters in fictional media such as novels or plays.

The cluster defines *embodiment* as (1) tangible forms of abstract ideas and (2) the lived materiality in which physical bodies and their interactions with the world shape personal experiences and identities. *Virtuality*, in this context, refers to the interplay between material objects and meaning making—an interplay that under certain socio-technical and material conditions gives both fiction and the outputs of generative AI their world-making capacities. For example, the contextual use of a costume piece made of vinyl fabric, craft foam, and metallic paint in a film determines its dramatic property as heavy iron armor in the fabula of the fiction. Both fiction and generative AI content offer material that structures certain worlds as plausible and “real,” while framing others as improbable or impossible. Virtuality thus gives figurative and performative meanings to artificial beings such as fictional characters and generative AI outputs. How does an audience’s experience of watching actors performing a role compare and contrast to that of people interacting with AI chatbots?

Plays such as Shakespeare’s *Winter’s Tale* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*; novellas such as Roald Dahl’s *The Great Automatic Grammatizator* (1953), Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1964); films like *The Matrix* (1999), *Her* (2013), and *Ex Machina* (2014); and television series such as *Altered Carbon* (2018-20) offer opportunities to theorize the onto-epistemic, oneiric, socio-technical, and politico-economic conditions for (and of) meaning-making as mediated by generative AI technologies (both fictional and existing).

New ways of thinking about being in the world lead to new research questions. For example:

- What is the relationship between word, embodiment, and the world? How can new modes of AI-infused sociality, including the advent of personified chatbots, be explored both from disciplinary or inter-disciplinary perspectives?
- Could semantic meanings be derived solely from text without the need for grounding in the physical world or through embodied mediation with the world? What kind of “language” would that entail?
- Are dreams (as we understand them today) onto-epistemically real or are they virtual and, if so, what is the meaning of virtuality they entail?
- How might generative AI models “dream” according to these other criteria?

- How do ineffable, embodied experiences differ from or overlap with the datasets that LLMs and other AI systems leverage?
- How might the line of criticism of AI as lacking embodied cognition be strengthened or re-appraised?
- What does it entail to regard a historical portrait or a generative AI's output as "lifelike"?
- What are the implications of thinking about virtuality and AI through oneiric theories, through the long history of animal symbolism and human interactions with inanimate entities (as in the myth of Pygmalion), diverse indigenous perspectives, or through Shinto Buddhism's animism—the belief that spirits reside in all beings and entities from objects to mountains?

This special cluster welcomes papers from any discipline, including the digital humanities, religious studies, art history, ecocriticism, philosophy, philology, neuroscience, performance / film / media, authorship studies, queer theory, computational media and literary studies. Essays may adopt new approaches to:

- embodiment in studies of portraiture or coma and paraplegic patients in relation to AI,
- depictions of dreams and neurodiversity as they relate to AI's modeling of artificial worlds,
- relational ethics that emphasizes the interdependencies between human and non-human agents
- how new understandings of virtuality and embodiment impact pedagogies and higher education
- analyze the tendency to anthropomorphize AI
- other corollaries using ecocritical, transhumanist, posthumanist, and/or disability theories,

Logistics and parameters for submission:

In line with *Critical AI's* editorial practice, this series welcomes essays (up to 8,000 words including footnotes) and shorter think pieces (usually 4000 words or fewer) on a rolling basis. We value interdisciplinarity (as well as work from outside the academy), so long as the work is legible to readers in any discipline. Please see our [submission guidelines](https://read.dukeupress.edu/critical-ai/pages/Submission_Guidelines) at https://read.dukeupress.edu/critical-ai/pages/Submission_Guidelines, including strong preference for articles published in a humanities style that do not rehearse arguments about AI technologies that are already familiar to the journal's readers.



We invite 250-word proposals for a range of essays, from short think pieces of 1,500 to 3,000 words to essays of 5,000 to 8,000 words. Please send 250-word abstracts to Alexa Alice Joubin at ajoubin@gwu.edu

This is an ongoing series, with no specific deadline at this time. Our editorial team will look at complete essays at their discretion.

<https://criticalai.org/2026/02/17/cai-special-series-cfp-virtuality-embodiment-and-meaning-making-in-ai-technologies>