



A precarious backchannel (X)

Description

Iâ??m continuing with my experiment in fiction as a way of exploring digital themes. See my previous newsletter episodes for the story so far. Iâ??m currently working on episode 30. So Iâ??m ahead of my weekly schedule. These are drafts, until I assemble them into a coherent whole, if thatâ??s ever possible. I welcome any comments.

Episode 10

â??I often felt as though I was talking with a human rather than an AI.â?• Archura the apprentice said as she stirred her coffee. â??So, a human was listening and contributing all along.â?•

â??No, thatâ??s perfectly normal AI. Itâ??s very good.â?• Maralinaâ??s gaze drifted across the people in the cafe bent over the screens of their various portable devices.

She said quietly, â??We proxies would only intervene when the monitor agent switched us in to take the place of the AI. We hardly had time to scan the conversational updates that appeared on screen.â?•

â??Things must have gone wrong.â?•

â??All the time. Users would feel it was like talking to someone whose concentration lapsed, who asked you to repeat things. Many users liked that.â?• The noise of the cafe helped keep the conversation private.

â??I thought language models were good at copying â?! hesitation, misunderstandings, mistakes, that kind of thing.â?•

â??Yes, but for all that sophistication, it seems we humans are better at making mistakes.â?• For emphasis she added, â??convincingly.â?•

She had forgotten to order a side of milk for her coffee. “Humans do make mistakes!” When you and I spoke through the AI channel, I knew that exaggerating the human side of our interactions would keep us both online.

“You managed to fool the AI agents, the ones monitoring us.”

An AI agent listening in to Archura and Maralina on the AI channel would have inferred that the user was sharing emotional intimacies. It would leave Maralina, the proxy, to continue delivering the “human touch.” Any monitoring agent would infer that here was a user captive to a roller coaster of emotions only another human could understand.

Maralina had discovered by mistake that her role in conversational AI provided an unconventional though precarious person-to-person backchannel.

Communicating online, Archura and Maralina would take it in turns to cry, or pretend to, but mostly laugh. It was a kind of code. They would readily declare love or hatred for any individuals that entered their conversation. Passion, hate, joy, sorrow, pervaded their vocabularies. That also applied, sarcastically or otherwise, to objects, places and droids. They “hated” the pods; “feared” the quarries; “resented” the drones; “adored” the crane; and were “bored” by Sumitom.

A monitor agent occasionally cut them off. Archura would notice a sudden change in Maralina’s tone, but then she would know that the AI had taken back the conversation. Maralina had enough points in her record to reconnect.

Their tactic started out as a game. It would later take on a more serious purpose. The AI channel was limited and precarious. They could open up via direct messaging and video calls. But this cafe near the CogLab became their regular in-person meeting place.

“I enjoy busy places. I was raised in a quiet village. It was next to a hyperscale data centre. There was nobody there.”

“Why put a village there?”

“We were there first. We were told the centre would bring lucrative employment. But that was only during the construction. My father and brothers left the farm to help dig the reservoirs. In the meantime, the farms were taken over by droid labour. So, they had nothing to come back to. Dad sold baskets by the roadside. My brothers left for the nearest city.”

As she spoke, many in the cafe were either on video calls or using screen content as the focus of their conversations. They thought little about it, but their online chats, conference calls, interactions with AIs and proxies, were coursing in and out of data centres and hubs dotted across the landscape, such as the one next to Maralina’s village.

“The equipment was manufactured elsewhere. A few people were left after the reservoir, water channels and the solar collectors were installed. People in white coats came to manage the droids that serviced the installation.”

That made Archura think: perhaps soon the whole landscape would be made of servers, storage networks, cabling, air handlers, chillers, cooling towers, and ponds, punctuated by towers of dwelling

Pods.

“That’s sad.”

“We are offline now, away from monitoring agents. There’s no need to use emotional code.” Maralina knew what she meant.

“No. I mean it this time.” They both laughed at the implication. Was everything they said online insincere!

“At least you had fast Internet.” This was a cliché from a bygone era.

“We had no benefit living next to this energy-hungry monstrosities that weakened our power grid. And the constant hum gave people headaches.”

“But you were connected enough to give you a good education.”

“We had access to online data, but no instructor droids when I was at school. There wasn’t the money.”

“But you were smart enough to train as a teacher.”

“We basically taught ourselves. Our school teachers guided us of course. After I trained as a teacher I had to cover subjects such as history, mathematics, physics, languages and even religion, as well as sports education. Considering the range of subjects, I had to rely on my students to teach themselves, as I had done.”

“Not knowing things didn’t prevent you from being a successful teacher.”

“Apparently. That’s what the woman in the white coat said when she came to the village.”

“A lab technician came to call?”

“The word ‘CogLab’ was on her pocket. She encouraged some of the young teachers to move to one of the richer districts. She said people like me made good teachers, as we were interested to learn for ourselves, and they would pay well.”

“So, they harvested the best teachers.” Archura noticed some droids coming into the cafe. She lowered her voice. “To cover for the defects in the instructor droids.”

Archura was aware of stories that AI had eventually diminished the skillset of human instructors in prosperous districts. Was she a casualty of this lack? Instructor droids knew all that a teacher needed to know. But instructor droids lacked the skills needed to coach their students to “learn for themselves.” Archura knew the story.

“I managed to come through it ok. But I depend on AI for just about everything,” she said.

“Yes, human teachers are still needed, and were imported to fill the lack.”

“It sounds as though things turned out ok for you though.”

“Until I was replaced by an improved instructor droid.” She sighed at the irony. “I was sacked.”

They both glanced in the direction of the droids who seemed to move closer.

“That makes me feel very *sad*,” Archura said in a loud voice as they got up to leave.

Maralina joined in. “But I *loved* the coffee, even without the milk.” They went out to the mall, where she reminded her companion that the emotional code only worked for proxies trying to fool AI monitoring agents. They laughed, for real again.

TO BE CONTINUED.

I’m scanning through earlier posts for relevance to my story-telling. See #248 [The Internet as research tool](#), #249 [Frustration](#), #250 [Aha moments](#), #251 [A sudden prospect](#).

Note

Banner image was generated by ChatGPT, using the story above as part of the prompt.

Category

1. Artificial Intelligence
2. Play
3. Podcast

Tags

1. affect
2. emotion

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