

“How will A.I.s turn art into science?”

Torrent

Grey. Of the countless thoughts coursing through Eden Edwards’ mind, this colour loomed over all. A scheduled afternoon ‘progress review meeting’ with her recently appointed project manager was certainly part of the reason. But this feeling was more immediately stirred by the blotchy, ominous sky viewed from her equally dreary office.

“And I forgot my damn umbrella!” Eden sighed.

Pebble Media Group hired Eden three years ago. Bubbly, enthused, and eager for a new challenge, she was thrilled to be offered the opportunity to work with the media juggernaut. Following a well-earned computer science degree, the role appeared to be a perfect fit.

“Consumer Preference Analyst – Assessing complex data sets to tailor content creation in a dynamic media ecosystem.”

Her grandiose job description was flaunted to just about anyone that would listen. It was her first job, and one that smugly induced envy among many of her friends at the time. Three years on, she desperately wished she had not been so naïve.

Pebble had monopolised the film and television series industry, holding captive over two billion customers that gorged on its exclusively streamed content. Mr Gray headed the Content Production division and epitomised the company’s approach. His role lay in formulating Pebble’s next hit series or movie. Despite being considered a media maverick, it was quality that took the back seat in his production model. The Content production team muddled together films and television shows at an alarming rate. But regardless of their calibre, an audience was invariably found. Whilst Mr Gray accredited this primarily to his creative genius, it was no mystery that other forces were at play.

The company was ravenous for data. Not just customer viewing habits or basic demographic information, but the intimate details their lives. Scouring reams of personal data was hardly a novel practice for any corporation, but Pebble quashed the competition through the way this information was processed.

Xplore was the name given to Pebble’s unrivalled artificial intelligence. Built by a team of researchers during the company’s infancy, the AI was given a singular goal: *Maximise viewer retention time*. After being fed the gargantuan data sets collected by Pebble surveillance, Xplore would predict which media in Pebble’s vast library would be most desired by consumers with startling efficacy. An explosive success subsequently followed, and there was little any competitor could do.

Sifting through reams of strangers’ personal information was not what Eden had envisaged when signing up for this job. Her work current work involved optimising algorithms to comb the web for customer

information. Xplore could then utilise this information in predicting trends for future films. Despite his resentment of computers, Mr Gray commissioned this project as it was predicted to make his work even more prolific. Occasionally, Eden would need to execute a test run and manually assess the results of a haul. Observing reams of private information about individuals she had never met was deeply disturbing, leaving her quietly affronted. Whilst numbly scrolling through a data set, Mr Gray suddenly erupted into the office.

“Just how useless can you be Ed? I asked for your project to be done by today!” he hissed.

The progress review meeting had begun unexpectedly.

“I have just sent you a rough program Mr Gray, I was informed that I had another week to finalise things.” Eden calmly responded. These interactions were becoming increasingly frequent, and she was growing tired of crafting measured responses.

Mr Gray paused, assessing her statement. Following his outbursts, employees usually only mustered a flustered response that left plenty of openings for further assault. But Eden was well guarded, and he was not fond of this trait.

“Plans change, I would like it completed by tomorrow at the latest. It would nice if you computer types could create anything new at all.” He replied in a piercing tone.

Frosted glass doors drew shut behind him, and vacant drone of cooling fans became the only audible sound once more. An influx of computer science graduates had led to plummeting wages in the sector. She had often thought this role would be more bearable if the torture of isolated working with only server racks for company was more financially rewarding.

Leaving without finishing the recently rescheduled project was tempting, but Eden’s fanciful thought turned sour after a quick assessment of the conditions outside. A grey mass descended from the clouds as far she could see, and the city was left in damp gridlock. It may be better to wait things out, she concluded. In spite of the miserable atmosphere, Eden was always intrigued by the way this urban jungle tamed the torrent. Innumerable litres coursed through the waterways but disappeared into an underground network just as quickly as they fell. She pondered the parallels with Xplore’s operation. Reams of information flooded the racks of devices around her, only to then be restrained and deconvoluted by this digital sewer.

It had been rumoured that Pebble’s artificial intelligence was in fact far more of a generalist than the company would like to share. Eden had long been interested in machine learning, and it was a source of endless frustration that she could not interact at all with the astounding feat of engineering. Most employees were restricted to interface with Xplore through inputting consumer data alone, reducing any risk of leaking the asset to external bodies. Tired of Mr Gray’s project, Eden numbly

flicked onto Pebble's homepage, as most people did during a moment of boredom. The volume of content was immense, and she found herself scrolling into an abyss of media. Endlessly scrolling. She had done that many a time before today, wading through an untamed pile of data. Was this any different? Perhaps it could be mastered, interpreted, and used to produce something else.

No footsteps or conversation, only the drone of cooling fans. Confirming there was nobody to witness, she scuttled over to an Xplore access terminal nearby and began typing. "User: l.gray". Sifting through a database of common passwords, Eden only reached no. 76 before the account was breached, though she was hardly surprised. A more senior account may provide greater freedom to use Xplore, she speculated. Opening the A.I.'s user interface yielded some interesting findings. Raw data other than consumer information could be inputted into the system, thus interacting with Xplore in a more fundamental way was possible.

Rather than feeding the system customer information, she began to provide access to Pebble's entire library. The A.I. was configured to predict user preferences from customer data, but it was not the sole mode of operation. Years of pent up frustration had culminated in this moment; she could finally flex her muscles and send a shockwave through the corporation. Distilling her instructions came down to: *Produce a popular film*. Could a machine produce novel video that was comprehensible, and perhaps even engaging, to a human? With this sophisticated a system and the size of the data set, Eden had hope.

Dried energy drink residue glued her face to the keyboard as Eden awoke in the morning. She must have stayed in her office all night, attempting to grapple with the problem. "Completed" read neatly on the output window, and a video file was available to run. Her approach involved feeding Xplore an almost unlimited supply of media, along with any accompanying critique so that the system could decipher what constituted 'good entertainment'. With her cursor hovering, she paused for a moment before opening the file. 'Click'. Hills, an animal, some stuttered images of a human? The compositing technique had left most entities on screen barely distinguishable and littered with artefacts. However, 1 hour 37 minutes and 14 seconds of footage lay in front of her, which no human had filmed, devised, or even laid eyes on.

After wrapping up her project for Mr Gray, Eden left the A.I. to recursively self-improve for days, producing progressively more coherent products. Two weeks after her first attempt, an item that Eden deemed to be acceptable was produced. Thrilling, emotional, and disturbingly human were all descriptors that came to mind during the surreal viewing. Whilst far from a Hollywood marvel, the rift of creativity between man and machine had been closed. A mass of wires and silicon chips had quantified entertainment, and it was almost time to share this marvel.

Little was spoken again about that meeting. A boardroom of senior executives had been deep in discussion when an assistant burst into the room. Mr Gray was incensed by the disturbance but permitted him to speak after perceiving the urgency in his tone. Timidly lifting a laptop lid, the assistant displayed a crowded webpage from a video sharing platform.

Blank faces exchanged glances across the table, but then the issue began to crystallise.

Account created: 4 days ago

Uploads: 3027

Views: 23,653,221

User: explore_01