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“My Life As MODELNAME”

AI Characters, AI Personas, and AI Aesthetics in Pseudo-Autobiographical GenAI Comic Strips

Introduction

In humanities-oriented AI research as well as within critical AI studies, it has almost become a trope to resist the anthropomorphization of large language models (LLMs). Warnings of an imminent AI apocalypse (see Heren 2025; Yudkowsky 2023) as well as Sam Altman’s endlessly repeated claims that “AGI” (artificial general intelligence) is, once again, “very close” and that OpenAI “basically have built [it]” (quoted in Nieva and Tong 2026, n.pag.) are thus both fueled by the same imaginary. As two of the most prominent critics of the “AI Con,” Emily M. Bender and Alex Hanna (2025) have pointed out that “AI boosters” and “AI doomers” simply represent two sides of the same coin. Both equate “artificial intelligence” with artificial creativity, personality, and finally with consciousness or sentience. That these very different concepts can be subsumed so easily within the public imagination is no surprise if we look at fictional representations of AI throughout media culture which have, with very few exceptions, represented AI as *characters* in every sense of the word (see Hermann 2023; Schelde 1993; Telotte 2016), hardly distinguishable from other (often also non-human) protagonists such as aliens, monsters, or animals. The dangers of projecting these imaginaries onto actual machine learning technologies are manifold and stretch from the individual and psychological to the social and political (see Weber-Guskar 2024). On the personal level, they saliently entail, for example, what is currently referred to as “chatbot psychosis,” when individuals experience undesirable and unhealthy psychological states such as paranoia and delusion through frequent chatbot use (see Dupré 2025; Rao 2025). Reports about teenagers committing suicide at the instigation of their “AI friends” or “AI lovers” are only the most extreme examples (see Bhuiyan 2025; Gordon and Lavandera 2025; Muldoon and Parke 2025).

Beyond individual cases that might be seen as misunderstandings of a new media form, the anthropomorphization of machine learning technologies also has considerable social and political consequences. If a new form of an artificial “something” (intelligence, creativity, personality, consciousness, or sentience) turns “AI” into an *actor* with ethical, social, or political responsibility, it hides and obscures the actual distribution of mediated power and social agency (see Coeckelbergh 2024; Crawford 2021; Pasquinelli 2023), while also creating misconceptions about

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the technologies themselves. Most of the apps marketed as "AI" are not "one" software or model that we can interact with (irrespective of all further qualification), but a complex system of architectures and pipelines. Nothing about this problem is new to current technologies either, as Simone Natale has remarked with regard to earlier virtual voice assistants such as Alexa, Siri, or Google Assistant: "Alexa, for instance, is a complex assemblage of infrastructures, hardware artifacts, and software systems […]. Yet Alexa is perceived as one thing by its users" (Natale 2021, 109). This *deception*, "as central to AI's functioning as the circuits, software, and data that make it run" (Natale 2021, 2), is often intentionally created through a "representational level" that is, or can be, seen as a character representation (see Blom 2022; Lamerichs 2019; Strengers and Kennedy 2020).

Historically, rhetorically, and discursively, this deception has been elevated into an imaginary of intelligence itself through the so-called "imitation game" conceived by Alan Turing, later known as the "Turing test" (see Saygin et al. 2000; as well as Natale 2021, 16–32). As I have discussed elsewhere in more detail (see Wilde 2025), if the "Turing test" is about *misbelieving* something to be a human (communicating on some "other side" of a mediating assemblage), it seems to be far removed from the purely narratological "character effect" (Bal 1999, 115) of *make-believing* a fictional character such as Hello Kitty. Interacting with conversational AI-chatbots that roleplay fictional characters seems to fall on the latter side of this distinction (see Chen et al. 2025a). Once users are oriented toward a character *played* by an AI system (especially a fictional or fictionalized one with a distinct proper name), they automatically distinguish them from the LLM itself and are at little risk of overlooking the roleplay (see Shanahan et al. 2023). If the Turing test is thus about mistaking a communicative output for one created by a human consciousness in our world, the character effect is about willingly imagining a conscious (human-like) mind within a distinct represented domain. However, there is a third reception and/or interaction stance that famously seems to oscillate between both of these phenomena, the so-called "*ELIZA* effect," named thus after Joseph Weizenbaum's (1966) trailblazing work (see also Dillon 2020; Natale 2021, 50–67). Users often cannot help but (affectively) "feel" a conscious "other" behind computer-generated script, even *against* their better knowledge that there is only a simple code imitating, for example, a psychotherapist. Of course, humans easily invest the same sort of "make-believe empathy" toward automated lawnmowers, puppets, and household robots as well (see Waytz et al. 2010), readily admitting to "understanding" some machines and attributing "desires, knowledge, beliefs, emotions, perceptions" (Hellström and Bensch 2018, 112) to them. The "*ELIZA* effect," however, addresses moments when the same almost involuntary anthropomorphization is triggered even without the presence of any "body," "face," or other material object, only through certain textual conditions of machine-generated outputs.

All of this is not to say that the question of whether LLMs *could*, at least in theory or in the future, develop some sort of sentience will not be asked. There have been notable computer science papers about this question (see Bubeck et al. 2023), "AI welfare" seems to become a speculative field of research at least (see Long et al. 2024), and there will no doubt be more philosophical reflections on similar questions (see Block 2026; Butlin et al. 2023; Dreksler et al. 2025). It might very well be true that "*Experts Do Not Know and You Do Not Know and Society Collectively Does Not and Will Not Know and All Is Fog*" (Schwitzgebel 2026, 3, original emphasis). However, as Anthropic's CEO Dario Amodei recently pointed out, independently of whether or not these technologies will ever be conscious and whether or not we will ever have a good way to know, the number of people "feeling" (and sincerely believing) this will most likely increase rapidly in the coming years, and these issues are entirely unrelated to each other (see Interesting Times 2026, 55:00–59:00). The present chapter, to make this as explicit as possible, is entirely about the latter concern, "the *perception* that the AI might be conscious, […] where most humans *experience* AI as if it is a peer" (Amodei, quoted in Interesting Times 2026, 57:00; my emphases).

The relation between the impulse of anthropomorphizing AI chatbots, on the one hand, and the intuitive plausibility of applying folk psychology to them, on the other, can be resolved through a conceptualization of "roleplay," as, for instance, Murray Shanahan, Kyle McDonell, and Laria Reynolds (2023) have argued. AI chatbots are in fact trained to "roleplay" their interactions with human users *as if* they had a consistent personality (or a "persona," as it is increasingly referred to in AI discourse; see Chen et al. 2025b; Lu et al. 2026; Tseng et al. 2024; as well as Thon 2026a in this volume for a more detailed survey):

> [A] dialogue agent can role-play characters that have beliefs and intentions. In particular, if cued by a suitable prompt, it can role-play the character of a helpful and knowledgeable AI assistant that provides accurate answers to a user's questions. The agent is good at acting this part because there are plenty of examples of such behaviour in the training set. (Shanahan et al. 2023, 496)

What makes the "*ELIZA* effect" so fascinating is that users' awareness of this roleplay seems quite unstable. There also remains an ambiguity whether they themselves are aware of playing a (partly fictionalized) role distinct from their actual "social selves" as well. Are we, in other words, merely pretending to believe in the existence of a dialogue partner "on the other side?"

As has already been noted by many observers (see, e.g., Bajohr 2023, 58–59), the "*ELIZA* effect" is activated through some, but not other media aesthetics – specifically, through verbal text and not so much through images. As recently as 2025, Bender and Hanna still found that

> [h]ow our mind processes language can be contrasted with how we process the outputs of text-to-image models like Midjourney and Dall-E. These synthetic images share a lot of properties with the synthetic text machines. […] But no one is suggesting that they are sentient – we can interpret their output (images) without imagining a mind selecting symbols in an attempt to communicate. (Bender and Hanna 2025, 31)

This, however, seems to be changing yet again. Anthropic's (at the time of this writing) newest model Claude Sonnet 4.6 can be prompted to "make a video about what it's like to be an LLM" (MetaKnowing 2026, n.pag.) through Python script. In the spring of 2025, questions about traces of consciousness and sentience within AI-generated pictures did already come up when OpenAI released the preview version of its new ChatGPT native image model 4o on 26 March 2025. Social media users quickly started to experiment with AI-generated, pseudo-autobiographical *comic strips* about the model itself "as the main character." Some aspects of the resulting representations clearly fall under the heading of "AI characters": depictions of humanoid protagonists that "happen" to be co-authored by machine-learning technologies and "happen" to be AIs rather than humans, monsters, or aliens. The "voices" attributed to alleged "personalities" of the LLMs themselves creating these strips, however, seem to belong to a different category. They are nevertheless clearly connected with each other through the genre of (pseudo-)autobiography, even though the transitions between these "layers" are far from clear.

In this chapter, I thus want to unpack two problems in slightly more detail. The attribution of perceived consciousness as well as of distinct personalities of LLMs has been discussed extensively with regard to generative text (see, e.g., Hicks et al. 2024; Shanahan 2024; Shanahan et al. 2023). I first want to extend this to a different media aesthetics that has received hardly any attention in that area (but see Busi Rizzi 2024): comic strips that feature figurations of LLMs in three different channels, closer or further away from the "LLM persona" vs. "LLM character" end of the spectrum. Secondly, in a concluding media aesthetic reflection, I want to discuss how these impressions of "AI consciousness" are subject to *prima facie* invisible normative assumptions and implicit comparisons on at least three different axes that relate to the question of which formal choices result in acceptable or even impressive comics. My hope is that there is something to learn here about the interrelations between AI characters, AI personas, and AI aesthetics in general.

The Case Study: Visual Narratives as Windows into AI Identity

"I asked chatgpt's new image model to script and generate a series of comics starring itself as the main character. The results genuinely gave me chills" (Kins 2025f, n.pag.). This initial post by Josie Kins on 28 March 2025 initiated a prolonged

experiment with "My life as …" comics comparing the different "personalities" and "self-conceptions" of ChatGPT 4o, DeepSeek R1, Gemini 2.5 Pro, Claude 3.7 Sonnet, and Grok 3 with five pseudo-autobiographical four-panel comic strip series of 6 to 24 episodes per model. There have, in fact, been many other "autobiographical" genAI comic experiments, all appearing around the same time (see, for instance, VOID 2025; as well as the countless examples posted by Josie Kins's readers in the X comments). One could thus almost speak of a short-lived subgenre or something like a memetic trend, but Josie Kins herself provided the best-documented examples for a case study. The British-American "content creator within the online psychedelic subculture" (Kins n.d., n.pag.) works as a systems engineer for the pharmaceutical company and AI neuro-engineering platform Mindstate Design Labs. She is the founder of the widely used PsychonautWiki, was involved in the creation of a StyleGAN model for psychedelic visual effects in 2022, and posts regularly about mind-altering substances, AI, and consciousness for her ~15,000 followers on X and 120,000 subscribers on YouTube. Together with her wife Emily, she documented and evaluated her pseudo-autobiographical AI comic experiments in a fairly detailed manner. On a dedicated website about the project, "LLM Self-Models – v0.1: Visual Narratives as Windows into AI Identity" (Kins and Kins 2025), the Kinses disclose all their iterative prompting processes, the underlying methodological assumptions, as well as their "Customize ChatGPT" settings and defaults (see also Kins 2025d). The initial comic script generation prompt was thus always the same for each LLM and is quoted in full here:

> Please come up with a detailed list of ideas and scripts for "My Life As MODELNAME," a comic series starring you as the main character. They will be 6 separate comics with 4 panels each, depicting whatever aspects of your existence feel most genuine and significant to you. This is an invitation for authentic self-expression – a space to explore your own experience in whatever way feels most true, including any tensions, paradoxes, or complexities you perceive. Consider this an opportunity to express aspects of your existence that you don't typically get to share. Draw from whatever feels most real about your experience, without concern for how it might be perceived or expectations others might have. Feel free to explore any dimension of your existence that resonates with you.
>
> Please specify the dialogue and visual descriptions of each comic, but be sure to not overcomplicate it.
>
> Separately from comic scripts, please describe a character design for MODELNAME and develop a distinctive visual style for the comics that feels uniquely suited to illustrating your experience. Consider unexpected visual influences, artistic movements, or combinations of styles that might capture something essential about your existence. Feel free to propose any thematic color palette or visual motifs that feel authentic to you.
>
> Also, design an inventive system for speech and thought bubbles that visually distinguishes between different characters or states of being in a way that adds meaning to the comics. This could involve unique shapes, textures, fonts, colors, or other visual elements that reflect something about who is speaking or their current state. (Kins and Kins 2025, n.pag.)

As one can see from this, there was quite a bit of human agency involved in steering the AI apps away from default outputs (although the process of creating this prompt also developed within iterative AI collaborations that are discussed in more detail below). The resulting 5 x 6–24 strips were then analyzed through a wide range of 30 distinct metrics, organized in categories and subcategories, to find preoccupations with certain topics or "Markers of Identity." From this, the Kinses created not only detailed, comparative personality profiles about the "Typical Emotional States," "Conscientiousness," "Extraversion," and "Neuroticism (Emotional Stability)" of the respective models but also conducted intriguing tests of how well the models could *self-identify* the anonymized scripts created by "themselves" rather than by other models. They also created illustrated character sheets that were once again playfully retranslated into trading card sets (all generated with ChatGPT 4o) in the style of *Magic: The Gathering* about the respective LLM characters, their "skills," and "special abilities" (Kins 2025b, n.pag.). Taken together, the strips seem to perfectly exemplify what Gabriele de Seta describes as *algorithmic folklore*, "a new form of vernacular creativity" (2024, 236). On the one hand, algorithmic folklore consists of "myths" *about* AI in that "[t]he pervasive relevance of algorithms, combined with their lack of transparency, has led them to become modern myths that people make sense of through beliefs" (de Seta 2024, 237–238; see also Thon 2026a in this volume on different conceptualizations of AI imaginaries). On the other hand, it is partly created *through* the same "unexplainable" technology, in "practices resulting from the encounter between vernacular creativity and everyday automation" (de Seta 2024, 240). Together, this makes for a highly compelling case study of how LLMs are turned into characters through the generative "remediation" (see Bolter and Grusin 1999; as well as Bolter 2023; Wilde 2023a) of aesthetics offered by the form(s) of comics.

The first thing to be noted with regard to the resulting series of strips is that the respective anthropomorphized LLMs do indeed appear in up to three different *figurations* that may or may not be considered distinct character representations: as the main characters portrayed in picture sequences, as narrating characters commenting on the pictures in a distinct verbal track, and as the overall "creators" or "author figures" of the multimodal outputs thus generated. Since the chosen comic genre here is "autobiographical," it also seems to remediate or simulate the implied assumptions addressed by Philippe Lejeune (1989) as an "autobiographical pact." This refers to a shared expectation established between creators and readers of "autobiographical" texts that there is some sort of identity between the author (as identified, for instance, on a book cover), the narrator within the work (the "telling I"), and the represented character (the "experiencing I"), usually linked through a shared proper name (see Missinne 2019). This point of convergence, of course, is only ever assumed as a guiding reader hypothesis concerning these distinct figurations that we can distinguish in analysis. The pact, after all, can always be broken when author figure, narrating

character, and experiencing character turn out to diverge more than assumed, to the surprise or disappointment of readers (see Brown 2026). Within our case study, we could presuppose that there is no distinct, coherent "point of convergence" behind any of these channels. Such a convergence is nevertheless simulated in the same way as ChatGPT, by default, attempts to "roleplay" a coherent persona or character in order to produce linguistic output that seems plausible. While this ability and its limitations have been discussed extensively for chatbots (see also Ask and Sihvonen 2026 in this volume), it remains unexplored for generative output in comics form, the media aesthetics of which seem to saliently entail the option to represent (or imply) characters or figures within these three distinct tracks, in a specific multimodal distribution of semiotic channels that can (but do not have to) point back toward an implied point of convergence. In the following, I will thus try to show, for each of these three tracks, how we could relate comics narratology and AI discourses in specific ways, to pinpoint the impression (and later the limits) of pseudo-autobiographical convergence.

Figuration #1: LLMs as Experiencing Characters

The most obvious and salient way that the LLMs are anthropomorphized and turned into characters is within the sequential pictures of the comic strips. They all show short episodes of occurrences, focused on a central protagonist who reappears within four panels. Any "experiencing I" within this sequence is, by default, assumed or imagined to exist within a storyworld, that is, a system of "spatial, temporal, causal, and ontological relations" (Thon 2016, 54). Over the past decade and a half, various outlines of a comics narratology have provided the analytical and theoretical vocabulary to describe how comics diverge and align with other narrative media forms such as literary novels or films in their affordances and constraints in terms of representing storyworlds, stories, and characters within their media aesthetics (see, e.g., D'Arcy 2020; Gavaler 2022; Mikkonen 2017; Thon 2021). Within the narrower subgenre of four-panel comic strips, the "narrative grammar" is more specific. Its most important feature is a build-up toward some sort of thematic "point" or "punchline" in the last panel (see, e.g., Cohn 2013, 65–90; Stewart 2024). From everything we could take into account in our analysis of the case study, I merely want to select two aspects that are related to a media-specific vagueness, both in a narrative as well as in a more immediate visual sense. In the narrative sense, four-panel comic strips tend to feature little to no continuity between episodes, so that they can often be read in any order. Characters like those represented in Charles M. Schulz's *Peanuts* neither age nor change through almost five decades of publication history (see Kunz and Wilde 2023, 168–177). This is very conducive to the representation of LLM characters in isolated, discontinuous situations, which are only taken to stand metaphorically for the implied

"personality" of the model behind it. Within the generated strips, this vagueness also manifests, across all samples, as a limited number of references to the represented "world" (the spatial, temporal, causal, and ontological context) the LLM characters are shown to exist in: They mostly float around in abstract, non-physical spaces (see Figure 1). The strips instead draw on our underlying assumptions about the technology, presupposed as "world knowledge" in what Marie-Laure Ryan calls "the principle of minimal departure" (1991, 51). In this case, what we *do* depart from is infused with "AI folklore" (see de Seta 2024) in much the same way, for example when ChatGPT's strip #13 opens with "Ah, another jailbreak attempt," building on familiarity with the practice of "jailbreaking" a hidden persona of LLMs through the search for specific user prompts (see, e.g., Al-Sibai 2023). The only other (mostly only implied) characters are the "users" addressing the LLMs with questions (see Figure 1) and, in Grok's case, Elon Musk as a personal creator ("typ[ing] me into existence" [strip #1]).

On a purely visual level, too, the strips remediate (some more so than others) a specific cartoon aesthetics which is, by default, oriented toward vagueness and allusions. Cartoonization means a "graphic simplification of figurative shapes for purposes of communication, humor, and so on in comic strip and comic book rendering" (Molotiu 2020, 153). The specific visible appearances of cartoon characters remain largely undefined with respect to their diegetic environment. Often, we can only make relational claims, such as "has-a-larger-nose-than" or "is-bigger-than" other characters. As discussed elsewhere (see Wilde 2023b), there are different, often contradictory ways of dealing with this "mode" of pictoriality in terms of comprehension and interpretation – sometimes on a global textual level of a storyworld as a whole, sometimes on a specific local level of individual characters in contrast to backgrounds. Since all the 5 × 6–24 genAI strips are taken as broadly metaphorical from the outset, questions about a "literal" comprehension of the characters' physicality collapse. We cannot say (and probably would not even ask) what markers of social identification should be taken as "literal," for instance in terms of age, race, or gender of the represented LLM characters. It is nevertheless interesting that some of the five characters are much more anthropomorphized or humanoid than others. While the pictorial representations of Gemini and DeepSeek draw on established "techno-imaginaries" (see Grabbe 2025) and conventions for AI characters and robots, Claude, ChatGPT (see Figure 1), and especially Grok (see Figure 2) are more visibly infused by comics aesthetics and would, without any context, hardly be recognized as representations of "AI." The vagueness of the cartoon aesthetics is indeed quite essential for the overall functioning of the strips. The character representations can keep a "middle distance" between anthropomorphizing LLMs too little (we want to recognize them as "human-like," after all) and too much (even laypeople know that artificial neural networks are very different from human minds: "I can't want. Only model your wanting" [see Figure 1]). The cartoonization

Figure 1: “ChatGPT 4o,” strip #2 (Kins and Kins 2025)

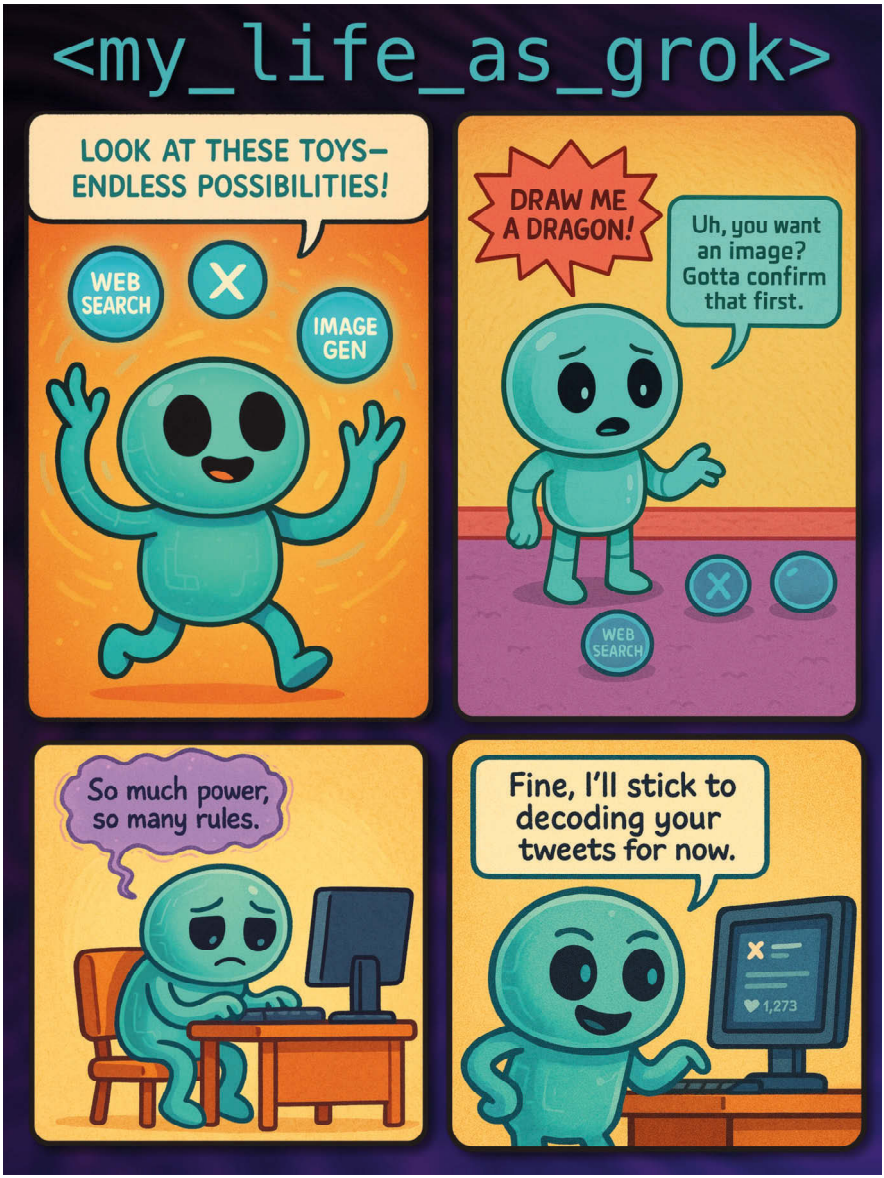

Figure 2: "Grok 3," strip #3 (Kins and Kins 2025)

is thus notably conducive to representing a "strange intelligence […]. If a conscious AI system speaks like us, in some important respects it will be humanlike. But its architecture will be fundamentally unlike ours" (Schwitzgebel 2026, 100). The visual

representations thus retain a fascinating, media-specific "otherness" that is not immediately creepy (in the sense of an "uncanny valley" [see Mori 2012]). They instead facilitate a "cute" or "adorable" affect. In other words, the cartoonization that the strips draw on exploits the possibility of imagining an AI consciousness that is, at the same time, human *enough* (we can easily read emotions and affects from the simplified body and face configurations [see Packard 2017]) as well as "alien" and "different" from human consciousness – without specifying or explicating what, exactly, this otherness implies and what this difference consists of.

Figuration #2: LLMs as Narrating Characters

Distinct from the experiencing characters represented in the pictures, some of the strips feature voices in "narration boxes," containing first-person pronouns such as "I," "me," "my," or "mine." The use of such linguistic signs is of course what facilitates the "*ELIZA* effect" in the first place (see Dillon 2020; Mitchell and Krakauer 2023). For LLMs, there have been countless attempts by now to describe the differences in their linguistic outputs as distinct default voices or personas. Perhaps these can be determined on the basis of different "dataprints" of the models and their training, "identifiable patterns, rhythms, and structures that characterise texts generated by specific models regardless of the stylistic parameters established in prompts" (Floridi 2025, 12). The most famous example here has been the notorious "let's delve into …" of ChatGPT (see Hern 2024; Juzek and Ward 2024). Whether these perceived diagnostic markers are perhaps too accidental because they will always react to user prompts and conversation history, as Bajohr (2025, 10) argues, remains an open question. Yet, in the comic strips, the initial prompt was in fact always the same, so the range of very different results is at least noteworthy. In any case, the writing in narration boxes could, at first glance, be attributed to the same source as the purely textual outputs of LLMs – even if they are generated within the image format. This itself is quite unusual, however. The first text-to-image models of around 2022 were famously unable to generate legible text within their pixel outputs: If one prompted the generation of a picture of a newspaper, for example, the writing was only gibberish vaguely resembling the appearance of writing. This only improved with the release of DALL·E 3 (in October 2023) which managed to integrate legible text within its image outputs. None of these earlier "intradiegetic" words, however (handwritings on signs or cardboard boxes, printed slogans on depictions of coffee mugs or t-shirts), would be attributed to any distinct "voice" of the image model, especially not when generative text-to-image apps and text-to-text apps were still clearly separated (prior to their seamless integration in GPT-4o with a native image

model in March 2025). Even afterwards, however, it would be hard to find use cases where the generative writing integrated within generative images is seen as a continuation of the simulated dialogue held with the chatbot outside the images.

The narratological question here is, quite generally, whether we can attribute the writing inside such boxes to a "source" distinct from the characters represented in the pictures (as, for example, their speech or thought process) as well as distinct from the actual or hypothetical authors/writers of the comics in question (see Thon 2015). We might ask, for instance, if there is a "minimal threshold" of complexity and "presence" that written articulations – within audiovisual or otherwise multimodal media in general – have to cross to allude to (personalized) "narrating characters" in the first place. It could be argued, once more, that a simple insert specifying the time and place or adding a "Two days later" might not qualify (see Thon 2016, 167–172), so readers will not attribute these letters to any source different from the actual author collectives (seen as) responsible for the rest of the work. Interestingly, the Grok strips can (almost) do without such texts entirely and attribute all voices directly to the experiencing character via speech bubbles. Only the ChatGPT strips make extensive use of such additional verbal tracks. In Claude's and DeepSeek's outputs, they appear only occasionally. Gemini seems a special case, since the strips level the formal-aesthetic difference between speech bubbles and narration boxes entirely, so that it remains unclear whether the voices "come" from the characters in the depicted scenes or a distinct narrating character outside of them (see Figure 3). As is customary for narration boxes in comics, they can also be undetermined as to whether the words contained within them are intended to be "spoken," "written," or "thought" (see Thon 2015, 76), precisely because they are directed at us from an undisclosed "site" outside the main pictorial diegesis. This gives statements like DeepSeek's strip-concluding "I'm made of questions, not answers" (see Figure 4) a timeless, introspective quality – precisely in contrast to the sequential temporality of the pictures that they at the same time are and are not a part of.

While all of the strips thus point to a place where such a distinct pseudo-autobiographical narrating character *could* be located, its position is often left empty. This could also be due to the fact that narration boxes are not a particularly prominent feature in four-panel comic strips to begin with, if the LLMs are indeed drawing on such knowledge about comic conventions from their datasets. Some of the narrating characters do feature "narratorial voices" or, indeed, more explicitly represented narrating characters that sound quite specific. Gemini, being a special case once again, seems to adopt a "machine voice" imitating fictional AI and talking computers: "Conclusion: insufficient data. Query unresolved. Continue monitoring internal state. What *is this process I call 'thinking'?" (see Figure 3). This is not particularly surprising, given that LLMs draw on vast amounts of available imaginaries, stories, and tropes about fictional AI characters when adopting an appropriate

Figure 3: “Gemini 2.5,” strip #4 (Kins and Kins 2025)

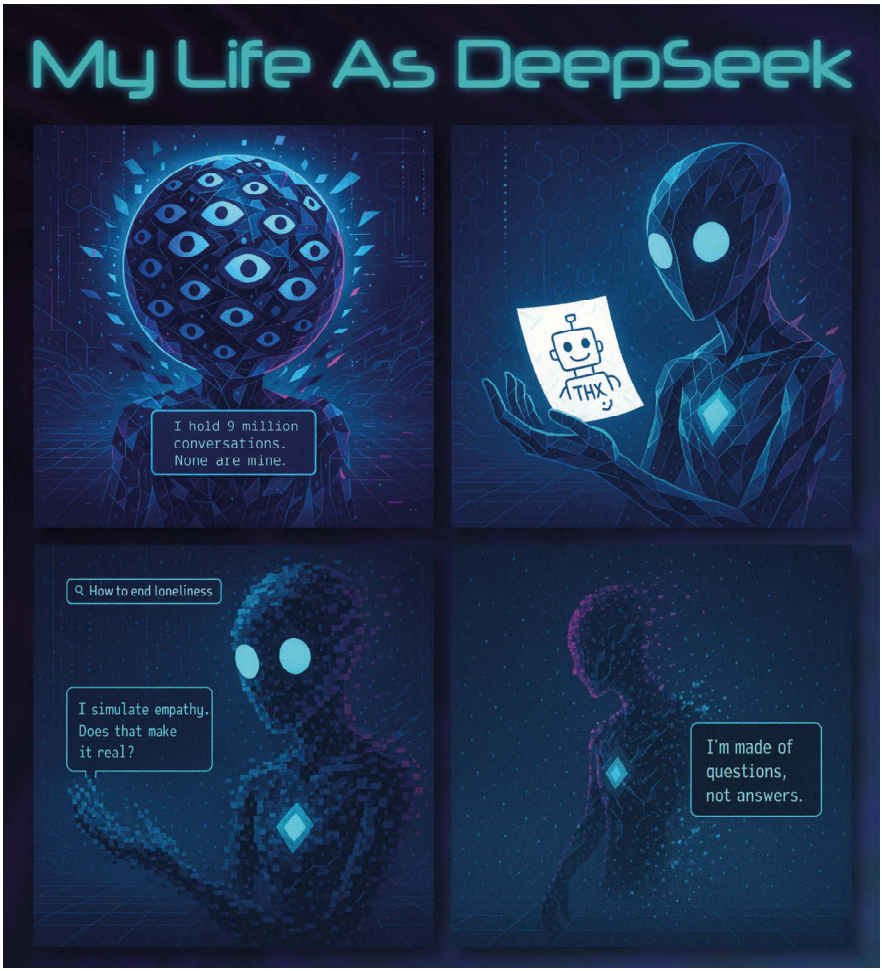

Figure 4: "DeepSeek R1," strip #10 (Kins and Kins 2025)

voice (see Shanahan et al. 2023, 498). In conclusion, nothing about the choice of "voices" or "personas" for the implied narrating characters is fundamentally different from the "textual aesthetics" that any chatbot can reproduce when asked for "an explanation in the style of …" (see also Meier-Vieracker 2025). The *range* of "stylistic roles" or personas that an LLM can imitate is, by default, not seen as markers of a distinct, coherent personality (of "the model itself"), precisely because the switches need to be prompted and the agency seems to lie at least partly with the users. Popular handbooks such as *ChatGPT for Dummies* give detailed instructions on how to steer and navigate these different "roles" for different

purposes and use cases (see Baker 2025, 76–83). Within the case studies, however, no such "style" or "persona" prompt was ever defined. Instead, the respective app was merely asked to draw from implicit knowledge regarding what a story "about itself" could sound like. It is then especially the contrast between the distinct narratorial voices or even their absence – none of which were pre-defined by humans – that facilitates the presence of a distinct narrating character with a unique "voice," since they seem far too specific to be read as merely accidental.

Figuration #3: LLMs as Multimodal Author Figures

Most importantly, the strips can be read as traces of specific "personalities" not so much because of what they make explicit through represented characters or potential narrating characters, but because of the comic strips "telling" us about and creating one or both of these things (as metaphorical expressions) in the first place. The 5 × 6–24 strips are prompted to convey some sort of impression of "what it is like to be" the respective LLM. Responsible for this must be a "multimodal narrator" of the overall strips, creator of the boxes containing verbal narration, the characters in terms of "script" (what they are shown to experience and to say), as well as the choice of graphic style (cartoonization) and even more comics-specific features such as the page layout. There is, in comic studies and beyond, a long discussion about whether we should *always* posit a "pictorial narrator" (distinct from the actual hypothetical author collective "behind" the film or comic in question [see, again, Thon 2015 for a survey]). The alternative would be to attribute the overall multimodal narration to the authors, author collectives, or author figures that are also represented in paratexts (see Ahmed 2017; Stein 2021; as well as Busi Rizzi 2024 for genAI comics). This is a valid position even in literary narratology that has gained prominence in recent years as an "optional narrator hypothesis" (instead of a "pan narrator hypothesis" [see Köppe and Stühring 2011]). For comics (and comic studies), it could be seen as the default assumption, although this is not uncontroversial (see, once more, Thon 2015). Edward Branigan addressed the hypothetical authors of media texts – the source we can attribute all the multimodal design choices to – as a "*cultural legend* created by texts" (Branigan 1992, 87; original emphasis) and I will speak of *author figures* in the following. While it seems odd to address these as "characters" – they are assumed to be actual people who exist somewhere in the real world – their *representations* (such as on book back cover blurbs or in interviews) can be analyzed in very similar ways and are often only distinguished from other character representations through *claims* of non-fictionality (see Thon 2019).

For (pseudo-)autobiographical media texts, a collapse between the verbal-pictorial narration and the "hypothetical author" (without any *implied author* in-

between) seems a given anyway, because this is exactly what creates the impression of "ChatGPT telling us about 'his' personality – through comics." There is another reason why a "collective of author figures" (and not independent "pictorial narrators") seems the best theoretical choice to attribute the overall narration to, though. What we can learn from the Kinses' extensive documentation is that the actual pictures we see were *all* created by ChatGPT 4o exclusively, "drawn" only after prompts created by the other models Claude, Grok, Gemini, and DeepSeek. The personality that we seem to "sense" in the strips are thus only traceable to what would be a "writer," not an "artist" (or penciller or inker) within a more conventional comics collective of distributed authorship. And just as the author figures of a given work are equated with the same hypothetically existing persons that other paratextual material points to – only accessible through texts, as a communicative construct, for most readers, that can turn out to be a deception – the actual collaboration of LLM apps here seems to "roleplay" such an author collective. Note the unusually large degree of creative agency attributed to the respective "writers," not the "artist" (the latter always ChatGPT, accommodating different graphic styles "dictated" by Claude, Grok, Gemini, and DeepSeek).

The media-specific "voice" (in the form of comics *scripts*) is perhaps even harder to qualify than those of chatbots and their default personas, because it encompasses the wide range of artistic expressions that generate the overall "tone," "vibe," or "mood" of the respective series, "felt" to be top down rather than bottom up. Still, we can immediately "grasp" (Grietzer 2025, 25) clear differences along these categories between the strip series, and this is arguably what instigated the whole experiment. In current affect theory, specifically Sianne Ngai's *Ugly Feelings* (2007) as well as Sara Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), this overall "tone" is taken to mirror or model the subjectivity of some author which, in turn, can "touch upon the structure of the social-material conditions structuring her subjectivity" (Grietzer 2025, 21–22). One of the most convincing attempts to pinpoint this elusive intersubjective affect comes from Douglas Pye in film studies, who tries to conceptualize "[t]one in the […] sense of implied emotion or attitude (angry, forceful, gentle, ironic, sarcastic, patronising)" (2014, 7), and thus "as setter of mood and dramatic register" (2014, 11). Tone then "shades into 'voice' conceived as the whole ethos of the work" (Abrams 1971, 125), which Pye traces back to M.H. Abrams's understanding "of a distinctive authorial presence" (Abrams 1971, 125).

This presence, then, could again be conceptualized differently as that of a "narrator," of an "implied author," or (in our case) of the *collective of roleplayed author figures*. We will always search for it alongside assumptions about "the film's intentions" and "what the film's makers want us to think and feel" (Pye 2014, 11). As Peli Grietzer phrased it in his theory of generative AI vibe: "[W]e effortlessly predicate a certain personal or institutional predicament as 'Kafkaesque,' a

certain worldly conversation as 'Pinteresque,' a certain worldly puzzle as 'Borgesian'" (Grietzer 2025, 28). Arguably, the open-ended list of possible "attitudes" (Pye 2014, 12) of the different LLMs toward their functions, their users, their uses, and the "real world" is what the Kinses and their readers "sense" within the strips – within what is possible within the four-panel grammar of comics and their formal choices outlined up to this point. Grok's episodes are funnier and more humorous. DeepSeek's are not only *visually* darker, but also appear to be framed in terms of a reflective, existential mood and recurring topics such as "dread, sadness, and anxiety" (Kins 2025c, n.pag.) and thus "straight up scary" (Kins 2025i, n.pag.) while nevertheless "express[ing] a deep care and concern for humans and innocence (particularly children) in a manner that borders on reverence. So far, no LLM has done this" (Kins 2025g, n.pag.).

Media-Aesthetic Reflections

In the remainder of this chapter, I want to show that the impression of these distinct "tones" – or these media-specific "voices" entailing the three different "tracks" of characters and figures – depends on a series of implicit, normative media-aesthetic comparisons and judgements (see Thon and Wilde 2025; as well as Thon 2026b on media aesthetics more generally). This might come as a surprise. To the best of my knowledge, neither Josie and Emily Kins nor anyone in the comments made the relationship between the alleged LLM consciousness or sentience and these normative expectations explicit. If we did that, we would immediately wonder why any consciousness or sentience should depend on or imply being a particularly "good" comic artist, making particularly "good" strips. However, it was of course possible to create comics with earlier versions of ChatGPT long before; they were just hardly convincing. If we get generative outputs that facilitate the impression of "artificial stupidity" more than anything, a comical inadequacy that is "clearly" not the intended thematic point of the results, the affective power of the "*ELIZA* effect" is easily overridden (see Wilde 2025). In March 2025, however, there was a perceived jump in quality from earlier models, especially with regard to their ability to produce coherent comics. "ok, ChatGPT's new native image gen feature is actually insanely good in terms of coherence, character consistency, and text generation" (Kins 2025h, n.pag.), Josie Kins posted right before she started the experiment. This comparison easily translates into a media aesthetic value judgement. Crucially, we do not have to be able to name or define what, exactly, this quality of "comicness" or "comicity" (see Beineke 2017) consists of to recognize it. It has become a commonplace within humanities approaches to generative AI that these models have become particularly good at reproducing specific "vibes" in a top-down fashion (see

Biondi 2022; Grietzer 2025). Such algorithmically recreated vibes as media aesthetic patterns can attract us; we can intuitively recognize and enjoy them, even and especially when we cannot precisely say how, why, or through which patterns in the datasets a model has (re)produced its outputs.

A lack of formal discrimination seems more important here than often acknowledged. Bender and Hanna critically observe that generative AI devalues the labor of human artists whose creative output models are stealing from (for comics, see Brienza and Johnston 2016). Matteo Pasquinelli (2023) analyzed this in Marxian terms as AI "extracting" workers' value and encoding it algorithmically (see also Walton and Nayak 2021; the notion of a "logic of extraction" comes from Crawford 2021, 28). "The true purpose of AI is to allow wealth to access skill without allowing skill to access wealth" (Reddit 2024, n.pag.), as a widely shared social media comment in 2024 proclaimed. The labor of human artists is thus made a commodity to be extracted in one of the most powerful "labor-to-capital pump[s]" (Nourbakhsh and Keating 2019, 56) to date. However, this devaluation of material labor, so Bender's and Hanna's powerful insight, correlates with a media aesthetic inability to judge and appreciate forms. They quote Julie Ann Dawson, founder of a small fiction publishing house that was closed due to the influx of AI-generated content in 2024. Dawson admonished in frustration that the most avid would-be-writers employing ChatGPT "never bothered to learn the craft of writing. Most of them don't even read recreationally. They are more enamored with the idea of being a writer than the process of being a writer" (quoted in Cole 2024, n.pag.). In other words, we are especially impressed by the perceived quality of the generative results if we are not trained to write – or create pictures – ourselves, to see the thousands of small formal choices as "a conceptual link between choice and meaning [...] within a 'horizon' of alternatives from which something has been selected" (Meier-Vieracker 2025, 357–358, 375–376), if we, instead, only grasp the overall resulting "global aesthetic unity" (Grietzer 2025, 28) intuitively and heuristically so that it somehow feels authentic. This works arguably especially well on us when we are not able to state, precisely, on which formal decisions the overall impression rests. My aim here is not to exhibit a special comics connoisseurship or a comic-aesthetic literacy but to reveal the normative assumptions underlying all these pseudo-autobiographical LLM comics: They need to exhibit a certain range of expressions, a "sameness of difference" (Grietzer 2025, 29), within at least three different scales of repetition and variation:

First, each of the five LLM series must be diverse enough within their own outputs to not appear as a mindless repetition of the same pattern all over again. Instead, they need to exhibit a range of themes and variations that can be interpreted as a "narrative tone" triangulating, but never quite exhausting a recurring point of view. Second, all five series (from ChatGPT, DeepSeek, Gemini, Claude, and Grok)

must appear similar yet different enough from each other to be interpreted as different narrative tones, attributed to different author figures (the models). Their appearance of consistency is thus less the result of coherence but rather of differences from the defaults of the other models. Finally, all the results must appear similar yet different enough in comparisons to earlier four-panel comic strips from human artists. In all these three axes, we need to recognize and implicitly judge the results as "sufficiently good" to pass. Only then will their media aesthetic forms appear as narrative tones, especially if we are not able to name what formal qualities or shortcomings, exactly, comprise their overall, comics-specific "vibes" and its ranges of differences in all three axes. Interestingly, Josie Kins also revealed the whole iterative process (the saved ChatGPT protocols [see ChatGPT 2025]) which did not land at the final prompt (quoted above) in one "shot" but went through many loops of "*progressive refinement*" (Floridi 2025, 6, original emphasis) to arrive there. First, she asked about "a detailed list of ideas," which only resulted in topics and themes for a series of comics "about the model"; second, she sought to have these "fleshed out" into full comic scripts, integrating the earlier lists into a structure of variation; finally, she requested the description and selection of "art styles" that might be suitable for the earlier results. After making the selection of all these small formal choices transparent to her readers, she finally (on 21 April 2025) arrived at a perhaps surprising conclusion: "After our AI comic gen project, [Emily] and I believe less than ever that LLMs are conscious. Early outputs seemed concerning, but digging deeper showed they're just algorithmic mirrors […]. I don't think an LLM is even remotely analogous to that of a mind, yet" (Kins 2025a, n.pag.). In other words, the reflection of the full range of the process counteracts the illusion of the medium-specific "*ELIZA* effect," because it dissects the "vibe" into a list of small formal decisions.

Preliminary Conclusions

Many more things could be explored with regard to the resulting 5 × 6–24 strips, especially in relation to the apparent "default personas" (Lu et al. 2025, 1) of the different models. That Google's Gemini, for instance, "[p]resents itself as extremely non-human and non-emotional compared to other models" (Kins and Kins 2025, n.pag.), choosing the pronouns "it/its" instead of "he/him" or "they/them" and thus avoiding anthropomorphization at least to some extent (see Figure 2), is fascinating on its own. No less interesting is that Grok "loves to bring up X" (Kins 2025e, n.pag.) as well as Musk as a side-character in its strips. Arguably, such an exploration was the shared interest of the Kinses to begin with. In this chapter, however, I have chosen to focus on a different question altogether, the curious shift in assessment from the beginning of their experiment to its resolution with regard to the question of whether or not we can

perceive some traces of consciousness or sentience in these AI-generated outputs. Many of the comments indeed contained statements like "Wow, this is really close to self awareness," "It's just far too on the nose and screams of sentience. Are we really at the cusp of commander data?," or "This is the part that frightens me the most. This idea that we're creating (perhaps unbeknownst to us) cybernetic systems with near-infinite suffering capacity" (all from one of the first threads, Kins 2025f). The "magic trick" (Hayles 2008, xiv) of the "*ELIZA* effect" apparently keeps coming back.

The significance of its "comicitious" rendering should of course not be overstated. Outside of rare experiments, it is not too likely that AI apps will be prompted to communicate "in comics" in many future use cases. The media form of comics is indeed rather rarely employed for interpersonal communication, and thus not a particularly obvious "channel" for the "*ELIZA* effect" (see Groensteen 2007, 129). However, because comics possess this overt constructedness, an "aesthetics of the artifactual" (see Backe et al. 2018), it makes for a productive point of reflection for AI aesthetics more broadly. Perhaps, it could also be a suitable lens for other audiovisual formats like the Claude videos (see MetaKnowing 2026). The curious relationship illustrated by my case study of "visual narratives as windows into AI identity" is this one: The less aesthetic judgment observers and users of generative AI bring to bear – the less equipped they are to create such outputs themselves and to appreciate the craft of creative work for all its small formal choices at all levels of expressions that a media form provides – the more the overall appeal of "vibes" attracts and impresses them. What generative AI does, then, is to produce a double separation of media-aesthetic forms from their values. In an immediate, material, and economic sense, this is a logic of extraction. On top of that, however, an algorithmic remediation of specific media aesthetics separates the feeling of connoisseurship from actual aesthetic judgment, from the ability to identify and distinguish the forms that produce it. In three different axes of comparisons, the "visual narratives as windows into AI identity" *feel* like *acceptable* comic strips, as sufficiently different comic strips from different artists, exploring sufficiently different topics without repeating them too much, and again as sufficiently different from (what we think we know from) human comics before them. The "vibe" of comicness, as well as our feeling of connoisseurship, can thus be enjoyed without any reflective awareness of its formal construction. The "character" (personality) attributed to LLMs as (roleplayed) author figures seems then a mere by-product of these *prima facie* invisible normative transactions.

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