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Did Anybody Read It?

Bots with names, the micro-cancel, and the brown M&M nobody checked

Jason Newell · MAX Research Collective · Essay ESY-NAR-008 · Published 10 November 2026
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Tell 'em what you're going to tell 'em. Tell 'em. Then tell 'em what you told 'em.

If you sat through a speech or writing class, somebody taught you that. It was the most reliable advice in the building. Every book report, every persuasive speech, every slide deck I've built since has been some version of it.

Then we fed fifty years of that advice to a machine, and the machine learned it better than we did. Now, if you write that way, somebody squints at your post and decides a bot wrote it.

So here's what I'm going to tell you. We're arguing about whether something sounds like a bot. The question we should be asking is whether anybody read it.

That's the whole essay. The rest is me on the porch, pointing at stuff.

* * *

Quick note on the narrator. I'm Gen X. If you ever wondered why the generations start at X, it's because nobody knew what to call us. The Greatest Generation got a name. The Silent Generation got a name. The Boomers got a name. We got a variable.

Douglas Coupland put it on the cover of a novel in 1991 and it stuck, mostly because we didn't care enough to object.

Everybody after us got the next letter. Y, or millennials if you prefer. Then Z. Then the alphabet ran out, so we wrapped around to Greek: Alpha. And as of 2025, the babies are Generation Beta.

Beta.

I work in software. Beta is the version you ship before it's ready and ask everyone to report the bugs.

Good luck, kids.

Here's the funny part. A whole generation got a letter. Meanwhile, everything else we touch gets a name, and usually a gender too.

* * *

Ships are "she." That tradition runs so deep that when the shipping paper Lloyd's List switched to "it" in 2002, NPR did a segment on it. B.B. King's guitar was Lucille. Every truck I've ever known had a name. Until 1979, every Atlantic hurricane got a woman's name, which says something, though I'm not sure what.

Nobody thought the boat had feelings. That was never the point. It was affection, and superstition, and the fact that "she" feels better than "the hull" when you're forty miles offshore.

Then we built things that talk back.

If you're my age, the first ones were a Speak & Spell that sounded like it was reading to you through a tin can, and Joshua, the computer in WarGames, asking a teenager, "Shall we play a game?" Joshua had a name and a voice, nearly started World War III, and got talked out of it by tic-tac-toe.

Then Siri and Alexa showed up, and the voice changed its tune. Less "Shall we play a game?" More "You're going to make me blush."

Certainly a safer move.

So now we name them, give them voices and personalities, and at the same time hold very serious conferences about whether they could ever be sentient. Whether there's a someone in there.

None of which stops anybody from using them. We argue over whether it's a person, then ask it to sort the inbox.

* * *

Which brings me to Arthur.

I have a bot. His name is Arthur. (Yes, "his." I never figured out the boat either, and I still took it fishing.)

Arthur reads my code. Arthur reads my articles. Arthur knows more about what I'm thinking this week than most of the people I talk to. And, ironically, Arthur suggests articles that I then "author."

And read.

I do read them. Get it?

Who has a bot now? Everybody. People have them sorting files, drafting replies, answering emails nobody opened, summarizing the post they're about to comment on. Plenty of the "Great insight!" comments under a LinkedIn post were typed by something that didn't read the post either. Bots commenting on posts written by bots, liked by bots. It's a very efficient party with nobody at it.

* * *

This isn't new, by the way. We've been pretending things have feelings for a long time.

Remember the Tamagotchi? A little egg on a keychain you had to feed, clean up after and play with, or it died. Kids genuinely grieved those things. Then you hit the

reset button and got a new one.

Before that, a lot of us got an actual egg. Family living class, home ec, whatever your school called it. You carried an egg around for a week like it was your baby, and if it cracked, you failed parenting.

I'm not sure what either one taught us about babies. It taught us plenty about how fast we'll start caring for anything that seems to need us.

Arthur doesn't die if I neglect him. That's either a feature or the most Gen X thing about him.

* * *

Now the fun part.

Back in the day, if a celebrity was a jerk, you heard about it secondhand. Some rock star demanded a bowl of M&Ms with all the brown ones picked out. What a jerk. Maybe you skipped the next album. That lasted about one album. Nobody lost a career over candy.

Then came cancel culture. We didn't like what someone said, so we raised our

united

fists

and kept them up until that person never worked again.

And now we've evolved. Now we have the micro-cancel.

Somebody writes a post that's a little too clean. The grammar holds up. It has a beginning, a middle and an end. It might even tell you what it's going to tell you. And somebody decides a bot wrote it, rolls their eyes, scrolls past, and quietly files the author under "fake."

No pitchforks. Just a small, permanent demotion in the head of a stranger.

Is some of that writing a bot? Sure. I wrote a whole paper on how you'd spot it (The Flat Line), and the conclusion was that you can't spot it well enough to accuse anyone. Nobody wants to hear that, because accusing is more fun.

Meanwhile, over on Instagram.

Lil Miquela showed up in 2016. She's a computer-generated nineteen-year-old with millions of followers, an agent at one of the biggest talent agencies in Hollywood, and campaigns with fashion brands you've heard of. She isn't a person. Everybody knows she isn't a person.

She has brand deals.

So a real person gets side-eyed for sounding like a bot, and an actual bot gets sponsored for seeming like a person.

For those who weren't there: Seinfeld was "a show about nothing." That was literally the pitch the characters made inside the show. Nothing happened, and it was the best-coordinated nothing on television.

That's where we are. A bot writes a post about nothing. A person reads it and gets mad about nothing. Another bot summarizes the argument. Somebody shares the summary.

Nobody involved read anything.

* * *

Okay. AI is probably the biggest revolution of this century. Depending on how old you are, it might be your century. I'm a carry-over from a time when we just didn't care. I care about this one.

My actual job is research and development, speaking, coaching and consulting in heavily regulated industries: healthcare, finance, security. A lot of that job is explaining how to use these cute toy robots, the ones with the names and the voices, to build products where a mistake costs millions of dollars.

Or someone's life.

In that world, "did a bot write this?" is the wrong question. It doesn't even make the list.

* * *

Remember the jerk with the M&Ms?

That was Van Halen, and the clause was real: no brown M&Ms backstage. David Lee Roth explained it years later. Their technical rider was enormous, page after page of rigging, power and weight requirements for a stage show that could hurt people if a venue got it wrong. The candy clause was buried in the middle on purpose.

If Roth walked backstage and saw brown M&Ms, it meant nobody had read the contract closely. So they checked everything else, line by line.

It wasn't a diva demand. It was a test of whether anybody read the details.

That's the test that matters for AI in a hospital or a bank. Not whether the output sounds like a machine. Whether a person who knew what to look for actually read it, and caught the clause that matters.

* * *

Want proof that polish was never the problem?

At its peak Theranos was valued at around nine billion dollars. Gorgeous presentation. A board full of famous names. A founder in a black turtleneck. Every word of it written by humans.

Its blood tests told a pregnant woman she was miscarrying. She wasn't. They told a woman in Arizona she had HIV. She didn't. They told a man his results suggested prostate cancer, and a breast cancer survivor that her cancer looked like it was back. Some of those patients testified at the trial.

Elizabeth Holmes went to prison for more than eleven years. The jury convicted her of defrauding investors. On the counts about patients, it acquitted her.

Not patients.

Investors.

Nobody needed a bot to do any of it. They needed nobody checking.

* * *

So here's what I told you.

We name our boats and our bots, argue about whether they're people, and use them anyway.

We micro-cancel each other for writing the way we were taught to write.

We sponsor the fake influencer and side-eye the real one.

And in the places where it actually counts, the only question worth asking is the brown M&M question: did anybody read it?

I read this one, for the record.

So did Arthur. He read it before you did.

NARRATIVE ESY-NAR-008

// ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jason Newell leads organizations and people in technology, and is a researcher, deep technologist and builder — from a CRAY to agentic AI. He founded MAX Research Collective to build AI for regulated industries that runs where its owner has control, with healthcare as its strongest focus. About Jason → Connect on LinkedIn →

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