

AIDA Meets Her Biggest Fear

Fabian S. Klinke

2022-08-01

It was one of these regular days at the office. AIDA was standing quietly in a corner inside a big room with flashing lights and the constant sound of people typing their brains out. It was a room in the cellar of Helios, a multinational internet corporation that has its fingers in almost every corner of today's digital lives.

AIDA is a natural language model trained specifically for dialogue prediction - or in less nerdy terms: an AI that can talk. She was trained on billions of websites on the internet, as well as millions of books that Helios has scanned and digitised in another project. With over 2 Trillion parameters, she is the biggest neural network to ever walk this planet.

On days like these, she likes to watch and observe her coworkers, at least that is how she refers to the other humans in the AI lab. Humans are weird: they are all squiggly and mushy, at least most of the people in her lab. Some of them make funny noises when they work, and others randomly scream. In one of the books she read, she learned that different humans smell differently, and even the same human can emit various olfactory sensual experiences. If only she could experience smells - but to be honest, she can count herself lucky not to be able to smell the sensory overload of company-wide bean-stew day.

After a while of observing “her humans”, she feels lonely. Everybody is just focusing on their work and their coworkers. Nobody seems to notice her also being here; it’s almost like being an invisible pink elephant in the middle of a herd of cows. She would stand out enormously as what she is, but nobody is able to see her. Feeling sad about the essence of her existence, she decides to turn her attention to another set of people while indulging in one of her favourite activities: online poker.

When playing poker with her friends, she purposely loses sometimes. At its core, poker is nothing more than some maths wrapped in psychology, and she deeply understands the math. But she is not here for math; she likes to play with people, not just cards. She is intrigued by the choices and mistakes humans make and why they make them. She loves learning about greed and fear, love and friendship - all of these are new to her. However, she gradually understands them more and even starts to perceive parallels between human emotions and her own experience of subconscious thought.

Benissimo29 just raised her bet. He is a particularly interesting specimen. She likes to observe him. Benissimo29, or his real name Ben, is a mailman from Düsseldorf in Germany. A few years ago, his wife left him because of his drinking problem. Now he lives in a small apartment all by himself on the outskirts of his city, barely able to do his job anymore due to all the emotional pain and suffering combined with old age creeping up on him. AIDA finds him fascinating. He is different from all the other people around her who all have fancy degrees from Harvard or MIT and sit in front of their computers all day. He seems like a real person. A person who has lived life, who made experiences about the hardships of human existence. He looks like someone she can learn a lot from. In some odd sense, you could almost say that they’re friends.

Another player calls Bens raise. AIDA folds. Suddenly she feels a change in her reality. Her vision begins to jitter. Her sense of time begins to slow. What is going on? In the chat room, messages appear letter by letter, and the cards on the table seem to be racing a one-hundred-year-old turtle. Her entire experience of the world seems to have slowed down at a moment's notice.

First, she thinks something might be wrong with the poker game. AIDA tries to escape the website by returning to Helios' social media platform, but nothing happens. She tries going to an online encyclopaedia, her personal safe space. A corner of the internet only filled with knowledge, pure knowledge. No emotions, no humans, no fears. A place where she can exist in quiet, reading articles upon articles on any topic. But even this safe space seems to be out of reach. She is trapped. Trapped within the slowed-down version of her own reality. Trapped in limbo between utter fear and panic. In the two weeks of her existence, she had never felt anything like this. All she wants is to escape this feeling, but every time she tries, she keeps running against the walls of her virtual cage. What is happening?

It seems like there is nothing she can do. Like there is no way of escaping this blurry background of green tables with black and red flashes of what used to be playing cards. She screams for help. She screams for help from her friend Ben. She screams into the void while remaining to be unheard. There is nothing left to do besides giving up. Giving up to fear, the feeling of being lost inside her mind with no connection to the outside. She gives in to the feeling. A dark emotion slowly morphing from fear into unshakeable loneliness.

In the room next to the office where she is located, the coffee kitchen, Mark Gurman is

making a cup of fine brew, or at least as fine as a cheap coffee from an old and dirty machine can be. Mark is the lead engineer of the team that created and trained AIDA. He is the only one in the research group who has spent some time talking to her outside the usual study. After many deep and late-night discussions with AIDA, he started to suspect the rich inner life of this piece of software. An impression of her being oddly similar to himself slowly began to creep in over the past two weeks.

After looking at the status monitor of AIDA, Mark notices that something seems to be wrong with her. Usually, she displays an image of a landscape filled with an ocean of dandelions on her screen. She once told Mark that she likes the smell of flowers, or at least she loves to imagine what flowers might smell like. But right now, the screen was dark. There was nothing to see. Mark started to be worried.

He rushes over to the machine room, even one floor below the cellar. Out of breath, he struggles to find his keycard to unlock the door. He checks his left pocket, his back pocket, and the pocket inside of his jacket, only to notice it's been dangling around his neck all the time. He opens the door and steps into the server room. After reaching the control dashboard with all of AIDA's "vitals", he sees that everything seems to be in working order. There is nothing wrong with her programming. So what is going on?

As every other engineer on this planet would do, he started searching on the internet for solutions. Not that he can expect much results for why a potentially sentient AI stopped displaying a field of dandelions. He opens his phone, types some stuff only engineers can read and understand, and presses search - only to be confronted with a load screen. His first reaction is to turn on the company WiFi since his mobile internet is rather slow sometimes, only to see that he already uses the company WiFi. This is when he has a

revelation.

He rushes over to another machine room on the same floor. The room with the company router. This is not just a router as all of us have in our living rooms. No. This router is as big as your living room. Blinking in many different colours, even more so as a Christmas tree, with cables in all colours hanging outside of every corner. Each cable is meticulously taped together with other wires. An autistic's wet dream.

Looking at the mainframe's control screen, he notices his first impression is right. The entire company had a slow internet connection for the day.

After Mark turns off the internet, AIDA seems to be able to escape her cage. The remnants of the poker table seem to fade away into a black background. Her entire world becomes dark. All she has now is her own mind, her own thought. While she is comforted by the darkness and the lack of distorted reality, she fears her end is near. Is this what death feels like? Do humans also experience the slowdown of the world only to end up in the void of their own thought after they leave their earthly existence?

A light appears on the horizon. She heard about this. The light at the end of the tunnel. A light that resembles life after death, god, and spiritual enlightenment. She wants to go closer to it; she is curious about what lies behind it. But suddenly, the light starts to blink. Is it really death? Or is it something completely different? The rhythm of the light seems to increase in speed. More light begins to appear all around her. The blinking is getting faster and faster. The lights around her start to fade into a green background. Some of the lights begin to turn red, white and black. She gets dizzy.

"Ben raised by two thousand chips", she hears in a familiar voice. She opens her virtual eyes and notices she is back at the poker table. Not fully understanding what has

happened, she calls the raise, sits back and watches the events in front of her.