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A MIMETIC METHOD: RENDERING ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IMAGINARIES THROUGH ENACTMENT

Abstract

How does a practice of *mimesis* — as dramatic enactment in a live-action role-playing game (LARP) — relate to the design of artificial intelligence systems? In this article, I trace the contours of a *mimetic method*, working through an auto-ethnographic approach in tandem with new materialist theory and in conjunction with recent tendencies in design research to argue that mimesis carries strong potential as a practice through which to encounter, negotiate, and design with artificial intelligence imaginaries. Building on a new materialist conception of mimesis as more-than-human *sympathy*, I illuminate how LARP that centered on the enactment of a fictional artificial intelligence system sustained an encounter with artificial intelligence imaginaries. In what can be understood as a decidedly mimetic way of doing ethnography of algorithmic systems, I argue that we need to consider the value of mimesis — understood as a practice and a method — as a way to render research into artificial intelligence imaginaries.

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Into the mimesis

In the early days of personal computing, Brenda Laurel pointed to the centrality of mimesis to interface design. Drawing on dramaturgy, Laurel argued that “an interface is by nature a form of artistic imitation: a *mimesis*” (67, emphasis in original). Laurel uses the word ‘mimesis’ to denote drama, specifically dramatic representation and enactment. Designing computational systems is like setting up a stage upon which varying casts of human and nonhuman characters enact myriad interactions. A pre-authored, fixed script does usually not govern the action on this stage, yet it can be understood in terms of a plot, i.e., a series of events that are bound together by an internal logic. In this sense, interactions with computers happen on a representational level and proceed according to a certain *dramatic potential*, i.e., “something that can develop and become ‘actual’” but which is not necessarily given from the onset (Laurel 82).

In this article, I propose to expand and update Laurel’s approach by developing a *mimetic method*: an embodied way of harnessing mimesis to encounter, negotiate, and design (with) technology, and specifically technological imaginaries. The mimetic method draws on Jane Bennett’s new materialist theory of *sympathy* in order to account for the kinds of affective encounters with nonhumans that mimesis can situate (*Influx and Efflux*). I here trace the method in the context of a *live-action role-playing game* (LARP) and frame it as a form of more-than-human design that integrates aspects of design fiction. The premise is simple: If interfaces are mimesis, then we can harness mimesis in the design of interfaces as well. I here focus on how mimesis in the form of LARP can be of value in the understanding and design of technology, which is to say,

how mimesis *renders* imaginaries in and through embodied enactment.

Even though the word has many different connotations and has been discussed at least since antiquity, mimesis is highly relevant in the study of artificial intelligence. [1] Since the dawn of digital computation, imitation (one of the many faces of mimesis) has informed our understanding of what artificial intelligence might be — and how we can know about it. Alan Turing’s conception of the *imitation game* — better known as the *Turing test* — devised linguistic imitation as a method for gauging intelligence in computing machinery as early as 1950 (Turing). As critics have observed, the mimetic logic of the Turing test risks perpetuating an anthropomorphic assumption in the face of artificial intelligence — and indeed in the face of intelligence *per se* — since it only registers the kind of intelligence humans tend to recognize as such (Goffey; Bratton). However, if we rethink the way we understand and practice imitation — as well as what it indicates — we will see that there is still productive potential in mimetic dynamics. Instead of understanding imitation as deceit — as a drive to assimilate with the goal of fooling the observer — we should consider it as encounter — as a possibility to engage and inquire. Conversely, instead of believing that imitation indicates intelligence, we should be more prosaic: Imitation indicates nothing else than an imitative encounter — and that is valuable in itself.

As a philosophical concept, mimesis is as contested as it is old, yet it continues to hold sway since it informs as varied notions and practices as imitation, representation, enactment, similarity, simulation, mimicry, sympathy, as well as, in more general terms, the relation between literature and art on the one hand and, on the other, knowledge and truth (Gebauer and Wulf; Potolsky). In this article, I bracket a large portion of the philosophical

conundrum of mimesis in favor of focusing on something more specific, i.e., the *practice* of mimesis (as enactment and imitation) in relation to *artificial intelligence*. In this article, I use the words imitation, enactment, and mimesis more or less interchangeably, noting that I am here not referring to the grand concept of mimesis with all its connotations, but rather to a certain kind of mimesis. I am interested in the embodied practices of imitation and enactment, which are similar in that they both base themselves on the processual messiness of situated bodies, yet also distinct since enactment implies fictionality, which imitation does not (necessarily). This embodied and processual understanding of mimesis is inspired and informed by new materialist thought, and adds valuable nuance and friction to the question of imitation vis-à-vis artificial intelligence. Far from being a monodirectional assimilation, the version of mimesis here investigated is deeply dialogic and ripe with politico-aesthetic agency.

Although this article takes Laurel's work as its point of departure, there are also significant differences as to the understanding and use of mimesis across Laurel's work and mine. Laurel understands mimesis as dramatic representation and enactment based on Aristotelian dramaturgy and is mainly focused on usability. To Laurel, mimesis figures as a tool to limit frustration and increase pleasure in the interaction with computers by making them easier — more 'natural', as it were — to use. Her conclusion is accordingly that designers should make any hint of computational procedure disappear from the interface. However, as Olia Lialina shows, the drive to "make users forget that computers and interfaces exist" (12) instills users with passivity and stupidity, effectively limiting their access to and involvement with the technologies that are integral to many aspects of their lives. The interaction might be pleasurable and easy, but the usability

comes at the cost of comprehension. Take search engines as an example: These incredibly complex systems are easy to operate. They largely work on a representational level — not demanding that users know about database search, keywords, indexing, ranking, etc., but simply inviting users to ask a question. There are options to fine-tune the search with specific syntax, e.g. searching for exact matches by using quotation marks, but the system also works if the query is a more colloquially formulated question. In this sense, search engines exemplify Laurel's approach by setting up a stage for navigating the Internet on a representational layer — by asking for directions. Usable as they may be, though, it is difficult to fully comprehend how these engines work, despite of the fact that they are imbued with politics and have major techno-cultural impact (cf. Noble).

In the context of artificial intelligence and machine learning — to which search engines also belong — the challenge for design is no longer only to make technology usable, but to make it understandable (cf. *ACM FAccT*). Not, as Laurel argues, to make the technology disappear, but instead to *make it appear in the first place*. Since Laurel's move to make technology disappear is motivated by a consideration of mimesis, it is tempting to think that the task for design should be to go in the opposite direction: Away from the mimesis in order to get a sense of how things look 'behind the interface'. However, the only thing we will find behind the interface is *another interface*, and each layer in the interfacial stack comes with its own techno-cultural specificities (Cramer). Design cannot escape mimesis; instead of trying to do so, we will do better to move critically *into* — and rethink — the mimesis of design. While some of Laurel's conclusions may not be applicable to the current situation, the key insight that interfaces work as mimesis is still valuable. Might we employ another poetics — enact

other stages or performatively explore the ones already given — in order to unravel the theater of computation and, in turn, render anew the mimetic frameworks through which we can research and design (with) artificial intelligence systems?

In the following, I introduce the LARP *Sivilisasjonens Venterom*, which will be the case through which I illuminate the mimetic method. *Sivilisasjonens Venterom* forms the backdrop against which I will discuss how the mimetic method sustained both an affective encounter with and an in-character negotiation of a fictional artificial intelligence system, which leads to a consideration of how the mimetic method figures in the contemporary design landscape.

Sivilisasjonens Venterom

*My name is Trinidad Obage.
I am a civilized human being,
citizen of Sivilisasjonen, observer for
Intelligensen. I work in the waiting
room. I look at things, people. New
applicants from the wastelands.
Peacekeepers. Even administrators.
My eyes are cameras, literally. I share
my vision, my thoughts, and my
feelings with Intelligensen.*

On 22 November 2021, the ERC project Machine Vision in Everyday Life hosted the LARP *Sivilisasjonens Venterom (A Waiting Room for Civilization)*. The LARP focused on surveillance, machine vision, and ethics, took place in Bergen, Norway, and lasted nine consecutive hours of in-character role-play (Bjørkelo et al.; Andersen et al.; Rettberg and Gunderson). LARPs are improvisation-driven, para-theatrical settings wherein multiple people inhabit the same diegetic space and interact via their characters without a script

and with no audience except for the LARPer themselves (Harviainen et al.). I participated in *Sivilisasjonens Venterom* without any prior experience with LARPing, motivated by my research interest in the overlap of mimesis and artificial intelligence. *Sivilisasjonens Venterom* belonged to the sub-tradition of *Nordic LARP*, which is characterized by being noncommercial, player-driven (i.e., not controlled by game masters or similar), and focused on inter-character drama and intrigues rather than combat. Moreover, Nordic LARPs often focus on politically charged and/or existentially vulnerable themes and are “increasingly seen as a worthy endeavor and as a valid cultural activity” though which to engage such themes (Harviainen et al. 99). Among the circa 40 participants in *Sivilisasjonens Venterom* were experienced LARPer (i.e., people engaged in LARP), artists, and researchers from diverse fields such as philosophy, computer science, and digital culture.

A core feature of *Sivilisasjonens Venterom* was the enactment of a fictional artificial intelligence system that was neither based on any existing technology nor controlled by the administrators of the LARP. This fictional artificial intelligence — which bore the name of *Intelligensen (The Intelligence)* — was a central aspect of the story-world of *Sivilisasjonens Venterom* and emerged semi-spontaneously from the interaction between participants in a way that was informed by the props used in the LARP, the fictional setting of the story-world, and some loose guidelines. *Intelligensen* was the main reason for my research interest in *Sivilisasjonens Venterom*: The fictional artificial intelligence system that emerged through enactment was a perfect fit for my research project. Before my participation in the LARP, I had formulated a research question circulating the potential of using mimesis as methodology for rendering — studying and negotiating — artificial

intelligence imaginaries in a design context. In my study of *Intelligensen* — which by proxy was also a study of a mimetic method vis-à-vis artificial intelligence imaginaries — I used my own body as an apparatus of knowledge development. I entered into the LARP on par with any other participant, acquired a character that would give me embodied insight into *Intelligensen*, and began role-playing. These nine intense hours of LARP make up the empirical foundation for this article.



Figure 1: New applicants arrive at the waiting room.
Photo: Eivind Senneset, UiB.

Sivilisasjonens Venterom is set in a speculative future, post- or mid-apocalypse, characterized by global environmental and military damage. One of the few remaining habitable places in this setting is the city-state of *Sivilisasjonen* (*Civilization*), governed by the advanced AI system *Intelligensen*, which works by gathering data from all citizens in *Sivilisasjonen* and making governmental decisions accordingly. *Sivilisasjonen* is relatively sealed off from the outside world (known as the wastelands to the citizens of *Sivilisasjonen*), and only a few selected citizens have permission to venture out of the city. Conversely, anyone from the so-called wastelands will have to apply for citizenship and go through rigorous evaluation before being granted entry. The plot of the LARP takes place in one of the waiting rooms, where applicants are evaluated and possibly

granted citizenship. There figure many people in the waiting room, including psychologists evaluating prospective new citizens, peace keepers upholding order, and the so-called administrators whose responsibilities are not entirely clear — as well as, of course, a lot of applicants from the wastelands. Even though citizens in *Sivilisasjonen* carry different titles and responsibilities, the official hierarchy is flat: No human has any official power over any other human — *Intelligensen* is the zenith of all power.

My character in the LARP was *Trinidad Obage* (*Trin*); the quote above works as part of an auto-ethnographic transcript of my experience of the LARP written from *Trin*'s perspective.[2] *Trin* was an ambitious employee in *Sivilisasjonen* with the job title of observer who had complete faith in and developed a kinship with *Intelligensen*. In the character sheet for *Trin*, provided to me before the LARP, it was made clear that one significant characteristic of *Trin* was the assumption that people were prone to error whereas *Intelligensen* always knew best, since it reached its conclusions based on data from all citizens. *Trin* was a somewhat unique citizen of *Sivilisasjonen* since their eyes — unlike any other person in the waiting room — had been augmented with camera lenses, feeding every visual input to *Intelligensen* in real time. In this sense, *Trin* was a walking, talking CCTV camera. Due to the flat hierarchy of *Sivilisasjonen*, *Trin* had no official power over anyone else in the waiting room, despite their high-ranking status. Instead, *Trin* possessed a special responsibility: to document whatever happened in the waiting room, which also gave *Trin* an informal position of power.

In addition to belonging to a Nordic LARP tradition, *Sivilisasjonens Venterom* was conceived as a *research LARP*, i.e., as a method of academic knowledge development in its own right. As the organizers of the



Figure 2: The administrators, including Trin, welcome the new arrivals to the waiting room. Although the official hierarchy in *Sivilisasjonen* is flat, there are some implied power relations. Photo: Eivind Senneset, UiB.

behavior of the (other) participants, this study focuses on my own situated experience of role-playing as Trin. Since I in no way took part in organizing the LARP, my perspective is somewhat unique in the context of LARP scholarship. Whereas studies into LARP are usually written by the organizers themselves, this article takes the participant perspective, which affords a view into the representational world — the mimesis — of the LARP less concerned with organizing and more with actual role-playing. In other words, the article is simultaneously auto-ethnographic and an ethnography of an algorithm (cf. Seaver) via role-play of a character existing in symbiosis with said algorithm. Algorithms are cultural, which means that our enactments of them can teach us a lot about them. We can thus provisionally think of this usage of the mimetic method as an auto-ethnography-by-proxy of an algorithm.

My research interest in the LARP concerns an exploration of the mimetic method: The possibility of inquiring into the design of artificial intelligence systems from within the mimesis itself. LARPs figure as ideal settings for such inquiry, since they instantiate dramatic situations yet do not share the framework or institutional context of the theater. Indeed, LARP has already made its way into design research, figuring as a method that

can “assist in the design process, in particular: i) to sensitize designers to perspectives and situations far from their own; and ii) to test design prototypes that would be deployed in those situations” (Márquez Segura, Spiel, et al. 390). The value of LARP in the context of design lies in the specific and embodied knowledge that emerges in the moment of immersive role-playing, which is particular yet informative of wider structures: “Improvisation gives participants significant imaginative agency through dialogue. At the same time, the immersion and embodiment enable participants to draw on their experience from everyday reality but escape its constraints and consider different socio-technical arrangements entirely” (Pothong et al. 1728). In this way, LARP carries a lot of potential as an experimental setting in which the “dramatic potential” (Laurel 82) of computational systems can be investigated and negotiated, not just experienced. Yet despite the rising interest in LARP within design research, there is a lack of inquiry into the mechanisms that drive the insights emerging in LARP. What kind of insight do I get from role-playing as Trin, and how does it help in the context of design? As I will argue in the following, the new materialist concept of *sympathy* – in conjunction with the notion of *bleed* from LARP jargon – is helpful here.

Encountering Intelligensen

*I have begun seeing differently.
Before I saw things. Now: Patterns.
Intelligensen sees what I see, and it
teaches me to see anew. Why do I feel
that we are similar? Could I be right?*

Trin has a special relation to Intelligensen, having undergone surgery to connect their eyesight to it. By virtue of their ocular

augmentation, Trin became the closest thing to a human embodiment of Intelligensen in the LARP, though it is important to stress that the enactment of Intelligensen was much larger than Trin. The system emerged as an amalgamation of myriad constituent parts, both human and nonhuman, including: (a) Multiple monitors spread throughout the waiting room showing AI-generated faces professing the doctrine of Sivilisasjonen; (b) a large amount of CCTV cameras scattered across the waiting room; (c) a scoreboard showing the individual value of each character from the datafied perspective of Intelligensen; (d) a specially designed app through which LARPer could provide intel to and occasionally receive messages from Intelligensen; (e) a small group of admins working in a hidden control room, overseeing the scoreboard, receiving intel from the app, and writing messages to LARPer; and (f) the distributed enactment of Intelligensen through the interaction between characters (to which Trin's embodiment of Intelligensen belongs).

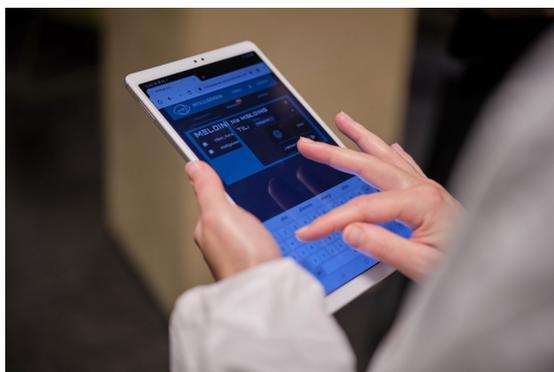


Figure 3: A participant interacts with the specially designed app. Photo: Eivind Senneiset, UiB.

In short, Intelligensen emerged semi-spontaneously in dialogues and actions performed by LARPer vis-à-vis one another and in conjunction with nonhuman entities. One of the most impactful nonhuman forces in the enactment of Intelligensen was the dedicated app (point (c)), which worked

as a *nondiegetic technology* (cf. Márquez Segura, Isbister, et al.) that was not meant to be part of the representational space of the LARP but worked as a replacement for an actual surveillance system. Through the app, LARPer could give positive and negative reports on other characters' behavior, thus possibly affecting their personal scores. Thus the participants in the LARP did not only enact Intelligensen through role-playing, they also constituted the surveillance apparatus itself, through the app. Even though there was a group of dedicated admins to some extent controlling Intelligensen, this group had only very limited impact on the proceedings of the LARP, since they were simply unable to keep up with the amount of input they received, and admitted afterwards that they felt completely powerless.

In the messiness of human and nonhuman parts to the whole of Intelligensen, Trin persevered as a somewhat privileged part, a human incorporation of the system that other LARPer would treat as an extension thereof. This was felt mostly in the way other characters interacted with Trin and reacted to their presence. Some citizens would ask Trin about how Intelligensen worked, while others would enact a distinct distance and hesitation towards Trin, presumably attempting to keep just a few secrets from Intelligensen's gaze. It was common for other LARPer to react with slight shock upon looking Trin in the eyes, since the camera implants were visible (i.e., I was wearing cosmetic contact lenses that looked like camera apertures as part of my costume).

Although other LARPer reacted to the character Trin, and not to me as a person, the experience of being the embodiment of an artificial intelligence system — and the experience of watching other people react with shock as they look you in the eyes — were just as much mine as they were Trin's. In LARP jargon, the experience of overlap between

character and player is known as *bleed* — a reference to the way in which the emotions of the character and those of the player bleed into each other. The notion of bleed is not unique to LARP; the vicariousness of the actor alongside the character they portray is a well-known aspect of theatrical mimesis. In some immersive moments of acting, “[o]ne stands in another’s stead and feels intimately a feeling that is not quite one’s own” (Bennett, “Mimesis” 1191). Yet whereas this vicariousness is a byproduct of traditional theater (where the goal is to address an audience and not just oneself), bleed is an important aesthetic property and one of the most actively sought-after aspects of LARP.



Figure 4: Closeup of Trin’s eyes. Photo by the author.

Bennett argues that the vicariousness of actors should be understood as encounter, wherein “(already emergent) shapes come into contact and become changed by virtue of contact, as each takes on and takes in something of the others” (“Mimesis” 1187). Bennett here frames mimesis in a new materialist context that rejects a strictly human-centered perspective, driving an understanding of reality as made up of processual, relational ecologies that stretch far beyond (but also include) humans. Within this frame of thinking, the vicariousness of the actor and the bleed of the role-player can both be understood in the light of *sympathy*, i.e., a “more-than-human flow of communicative transfers” between and across humans and nonhumans, working akin to an atmospheric force (Bennett, *Influx and Efflux* 29). In other words, bleed also happens in relation to nonhuman entities — such as Intelligensen.

Sympathy, in turn, can be understood as a new materialist epistemology, a theory of how human beings can encounter and come to know (parts of) a more-than-human reality.

Neither bleed nor sympathy are, however, to be understood as a flattening of the space between player and character, or between human and more-than-human. In LARP, it is a basic characteristic that each participant is simultaneously both a player and a character, “the goals of which are rarely identical” (Harviainen et al. 88). Within Nordic LARP, it is e.g. common for the player to make bad decisions on behalf of their characters, to the end of situating drama; this is a doctrine known as *play to lose*. In other words, there persists a necessary, critical distance between the player and the character. Likewise, sympathy does not afford a human to know or be able to conceptualize every aspect of the more-than-human entities we might encounter through mimesis. Rather than an epistemological flattening, sympathy is “a feeling-with that respects the distance, and preserves the differences” between the constituent parts of the encounter (Bennett, *Influx and Efflux* 36). In role-playing as Trin, I encountered the character. I did not become Trin, yet I felt some of what Trin felt. Likewise, Trin did not become Intelligensen, but encountered it via sympathy. In turn, I encountered Intelligensen through Trin’s encounter with it.

As an example, I became acutely aware of the materiality of my own eyes as apparatuses of perception during the LARP. By virtue of having cameras for eyes, Trin — and I with them — began perceiving differently. On one level, this awareness might be explained by the fact that I was wearing (cosmetic) contact lenses for the first time in my life, and suddenly sensed my own eyes differently. At the same time, on another level, the experience of watching other LARPer react to my eyes with shock try to

hide things from me was just as integral to my sudden ocular awareness. The presence of the (diegetic and nondiegetic) camera lenses made me/Trin attuned to the politics perspective that characterizes visual data. This attunement did not arrive out of thin air but was grounded in my out-of-character knowledge — being a critical scholar of machine learning, the politics of data is a central assumption in my work. Yet Trin's realization was not banal to me: In the act of role-playing, my foreknowledge became embodied and gained an affective intensity as well as fine-tuned nuances. This was not only an interesting experience for myself: It can also be understood as an important part of a more-than-human engagement with Intelligensen itself. To understand this proposition, we must ask, what was Intelligensen? What does it mean to encounter a system that existed mostly as dramatic residue of the interaction between LARPer's?

Negotiating Intelligensen

I feel more and more distant from my colleagues. They look at things, but they don't see the patterns. They don't understand the beauty of Intelligensen. Some of the new arrivals seem to lack trust in Intelligensen. I must show them its beauty. Only I can show them.

The assertion that I encountered Intelligensen by role-playing as Trin begs the question: What was it that I encountered? Intelligensen was, as we know, not an actual AI, nor was it based on any specific AI system — though it was loosely based on broad ideas of, respectively, machine learning (exemplified in the way it would reach conclusions based on vast data input) and CCTV surveillance (exemplified in the multitude of CCTV

cameras scattered across the waiting room). Participating LARPer's received no formal set of characteristics that would define Intelligensen, but there were some activities set up during the LARP to situate some of the (fictional) functionality of Intelligensen: Characters were invited to do some image tagging exercises and one of the organizers of the LARP held an in-character lecture about machine vision. Apart from this, the consideration of how Intelligensen worked was completely left to people's *artificial intelligence imaginaries*, i.e., what people imagine when they imagine artificial intelligence. When I (through Trin) encountered Intelligensen, what I encountered was a manifestation of a distributed artificial intelligence imaginary.

Imaginaries cannot be separated from the technologies they illuminate; they are integral to the way technologies work in and through culture. Importantly, an imaginary “is not to be understood as a false belief or fetish of sorts but, rather, as the way in which people imagine, perceive and experience” the phenomenon in question as well as “what these imaginations make possible” (Bucher, “The Algorithmic Imaginary” 31). In this way, imaginaries themselves can be considered in the light of new materialist thought; as entities that take on a life of their own, not reducible to any single human being's mental world (Bucher, *If...then*). This does not mean that imaginaries are the same for everyone. As mentioned, my own artificial intelligence imaginary was informed by my status as critical scholar of the topic. Other LARPer's (ranging from laypeople to computer scientists) similarly entered the situation with particular foreknowledge. Yet while our foreknowledge differed, we were still largely on the same page in the enactment of Intelligensen. Our enactments, based on our imaginaries, were like different renditions of the same thing at different resolutions. Put differently,



Figure 5: An administrator standing in front of the scoreboard, one of many manifestations that sustained the enactment of Intelligensen. Photo: Eivind Senneset, UiB.

the multiplicity of present imaginaries in the LARP resulted in the emergence of a single thing: Intelligensen.

Yet our imaginaries did not emerge out of nothing, but were informed by a broader history of invoking artificial intelligence through narrative. People have used storytelling to reckon with the notion of intelligent machines at least since Antiquity, taking place “in a diverse range of narrative forms, in myths, legends, apocryphal stories, rumours, fiction, and nonfiction (particularly of the more speculative kind)” (Cave et al. 4). Artificial intelligence imaginaries themselves can be understood as mimesis on two levels, working both as a model of how artificial intelligence is an imitation of human cognition (understood as mimesis), while simultaneously working as the types of narrative means (again, understood as mimesis) through which the imaginary of the technology plays out (Keating and Nourbakhsh). In this way, fiction and fact blurs — or bleeds into each other, as LARPer would have it — meaning that the critical investigation of narratives of artificial intelligence is integral to gauging their associated imaginaries, in turn illuminating how they work with and in culture. While the topic of intelligent machines is perhaps less speculative today than it might have been some 2,000 years ago, the long tradition of

thinking about intelligent machines through narrative “form[s] the backdrop against which AI systems are being developed, and against which these developments are interpreted and assessed” (Cave et al. 7). This backdrop, then, also informed the distributed enactment of Intelligensen.

In *Sivilisasjonens Venterom*, the imaginary of Intelligensen came to focus almost exclusively on a visual paradigm of surveillance, which also influenced my performance of Trin, who operated as a living CCTV camera. My embodied experience of the politics of visual data, as described above, was influenced by my own preconceptions, but it was also sustained by a visual, Orwellian understanding of surveillance that does not map seamlessly onto the landscape of data-driven capture (cf. Agre), and which are quit far from my out-of-character understanding of data-driven surveillance. Visual input data are certainly important parts of data-intensive surveillance systems, but so too are non-visual data, e.g., the data harvested from our behaviors on and with digital technology that are not necessarily gathered via cameras, but via other sensors or small scripts such as cookies. Thus, in role-playing, I experienced some parts of my academically informed foreknowledge — namely, the politics of visual data — but at the same time I was cut off from experiencing other aspects of that foreknowledge, such as the importance of other kinds of (nonvisual) data. The organizers of *Sivilisasjonens Venterom* similarly noticed that the LARP ended up solidifying dominant tropes of surveillance, specifically an authoritative understanding that is common in the Norwegian context and which roughly maps onto the Orwellian paradigm that I encountered (Bjørkelo et al.). Accordingly, it is tempting to think that the general tendency in the LARP was not to challenge imaginaries, but to solidify them.

The LARP did, however, bring with it at least a few moments of negotiation of imaginaries that may have escaped the broad perspective of the organizers, but which emerged in spontaneous in-character situations. One example of such negotiation happened during a secret meeting of dissidents, a small group conspiring to sabotage Intelligensen. Trin stumbled into this meeting by chance, but chose to stay out of curiosity and shock. As mentioned, Trin was completely loyal to Intelligensen and was convinced that people could only be conspiring against the system because of a misunderstanding of the beauty of it: An example of human error. Rather than using force, Trin took it upon themselves to educate the dissidents. The dissidents would argue that Intelligensen was clearly a system for authoritarian domination, whereas Trin



Figure 6: A secret meeting of dissidents. Photo: Eivind Senneset, UiB.

would maintain that Intelligensen was the ultimate example of democracy: decisions were made based on data gathered from *all* citizens, *all* of the time.

The conversations between Trin and various dissidents would touch upon a wide variety of themes and questions that we would usually not even consider out-of-character, but which became central to our in-character discussions. By conversing from an in-character perspective, we were able to bracket our usual cultural codes and embed ourselves in the world views of our

characters (cf. Pothong et al.). The opinions of our characters were not random, but influenced by the information in our character sheets in conjunction with our preconceptions. The dissidents would be very squarely against almost every aspect of Intelligensen, aligning with the mentioned Orwellian imaginary of surveillance as a tool for authoritarian domination. Meanwhile, Trin was quite the opposite, having full faith in and loyalty to Intelligensen. While both positions were too extreme, their interaction shed light on a wealth of nuance in the space between them while also clearly demonstrating (to me at least) an unproductive rigidity in the overly skeptical as well as in the overly faithful position. Although we reached no conclusion, the secret meeting did enable us to see beyond our out-of-character world views to get a sense of other possible imaginaries. As I will argue, the dual potential of LARP to situate encounters with imaginaries while simultaneously sustaining a negotiation of those same imaginaries through enactment and in-character discussion positions LARP as a prime example of the vibrancy and relevance of the mimetic method to design.

Designing (with) Intelligensen

*People ask me about Intelligensen.
I try to answer, but words cannot
do it justice. They seem to think
Intelligensen is some foreign thing.*

Mimesis – as a practice of enactment – situates encounters with and sustains negotiations of artificial intelligence imaginaries. That is to say, the mimetic method expressly figures as a more-than-human approach to design, manifesting a new materialist stance.

By way of mimesis, *Sivilisasjonens Venterom* situated embodied insight into the “plural and meshed entanglements of human and thing perspectives” that are integral to more-than-human design (Reddy et al. 8). The endeavor to do design with a new materialist understanding of the world warrants a shift away from human-centered assumptions (on which much foundational design scholarship has drawn) and towards a redistribution of the dynamics of design processes across humans and nonhumans and a reconsideration of the very concept of agency in design. The overarching doctrine thus becomes “not [to] design *for* ... technologies but *with* them” (Giaccardi and Redström 35, emphasis in original).

By working via sympathy, the mimetic method engages an epistemic stance that is aligned with new materialist thought, and that bases itself on affective encounter. In other words, the mimetic method is aligned with Betti Marenko’s understanding of designing with technology in which “agency is something that emerges out of encounters with things ... it is not something that objects *have* but something that objects *are*” (Marenko 228, emphasis in original). Interestingly, the more-than-human entity that I am here discussing — namely *Intelligensen* — was less an object as such and more an enactment of a multitude of imaginaries. Imaginaries are integral aspects of the materiality of technologies, which means it is not possible to separate objects from imaginaries (Bucher, *If...then*; Marenko). Still, the purely enacted imaginary of *Intelligensen* opened it up for reconsideration, and although the general tendency was to reinforce cultural tropes, there emerged spontaneous moments of radical exploration of alternative imaginaries.

We can understand *Intelligensen* as a kind of prototype, which all the LARPer had participated in creating. More specifically, I am thinking of the notion of *diegetic*

prototypes, i.e., fictional technologies that are implemented in a narrative setting wherein they figure as ordinary things (Kirby). Diegetic prototypes are integrated aspects of design fiction. Design fiction, in turn, focuses on the exploration of possible cultural impacts of technology, or other human-technology relations, as well as (above all) speculative explorations of our present techno-cultural situation through engagements with fictional plots (Bleecker).

Design fiction can be seen as a current manifestation of a mimesis-oriented approach to design, which uses artistic representation as an integrated aspect of the design of new technologies. The mimetic method that I propose is thus closely related to design fiction, but it also differs from it with regard to the role of the mimesis. In design fiction, the artistic representation is mainly a communicative form — ranging from narrative plots to less narrative *entry points* to speculative worlds — and exists as a fairly stable thing that should be considered and discussed (Blythe; Coulton et al.). The mimesis of the mimetic method is not (only) there to communicate a fictional proposition, but to enact new propositions collectively. It is a process and a practice that concerns itself with the ephemeral and situated encounter with imaginaries, meaning that the central thing is not the (diegetic) prototype *per se*, but its emergence via enactment.

The mimetic method connects more-than-human design to design fiction, drawing on the sensibilities towards reimagining the world that are integral to design fiction in a more-than-human context. The integration of fiction is common in new materialist thought since fictionality affords a kind of thinking that can reconsider, instead of only react to, the world (Skiveren). Thus, the mimetic method shows a practice-centered way in which we approach the question that figures in more-than-human context of what design

“*might become* as opposed to what it should be” (Giaccardi and Redström 38, emphasis in original).

With the mimetic method, it becomes clear that the task of *making the technology appear*, which I set out to investigate in the beginning of this article, actually takes the form of *making the mimesis appear* — or of rendering imaginaries through enactment. It is therein that the value of LARP becomes most evident as a setting in which the mimetic method fits exceptionally well. In conceptually framing LARP as mimesis, we can see how the use of LARP “to sensitize designers to perspectives and situations far from their own” (Márquez Segura, Spiel, et al. 390) is at its base the working of bleed and sympathy, via mimesis. In this sense, this article expands the techno-cultural and theoretical scope of doing mimesis in design, taking on larger questions of the materialities, imaginaries, and epistemologies of digital technology, thus adding depth and nuance to other accounts of the potential of mimesis to design (cf. Dörrenbächer et al.). By bridging more-than-human sensibilities with the capabilities for reimagination carried by fiction, and by unfolding in a role-play setting through a new materialist notion of sympathy, the mimetic method locates its insights in deeply embodied, ephemeral encounters of enactment.



Figure 7: The administrators, including Trin (right), carefully overseeing the proceedings in the waiting room. Photo: Eivind Senneset, UiB.

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Notes

[1] In my research project, Machine Mimesis, I document and unravel the productive overlap of machine learning and mimesis. Cf. <https://darc.au.dk/mse/>

[2] Loosely based on a text published in this journal’s sister publication, *Peer Reviewed Newspaper*, vol. 11 no. 1 (2022): Rendering Research. Cf. <https://darc.au.dk/newspaper>.

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