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Final Project Proposal - *CTRL*

Artist Statement

In this animation I want to place further into doubt concepts that are already quite difficult to define. Consciousness, identity, free will – these are all extremely rich subjects from which confusing stories can sprout.

Combining the highly speculative sphere of Artificial Intelligence and the familiar world of humanity creates a delightful mix of fiction and reality that gives enough creative freedom to come up with many strange and far-fetched ideas, while the audience still believes “this could happen in a not-so-distant future”.

This being my most ambitious and abstract animation project so far, I would like viewers to have an open mind about what is happening on-screen. I think this story has many elements that would be easier to understand if they were plastered with explanations, but the joy in watching a movie or reading a book is wondering where these events are taking us without knowing what they mean. I want the viewer to catch up to the universe of the animation on their own, without holding anyone’s hand and pointing out the ups and downs of the story.

The short animations by Jan Svankmajer (*Darkness, Light, Darkness* (1989), *Dimensions of Dialogue* (1982)) and Norman McLaren (*Begone Dull Care* (1949), *A Chairy Tale* (1957)) provide little to no explanation as to the events that are unfurling on screen. The artists may have created their artworks with a certain message in mind, but it is ultimately up to the viewer to

come up with their own interpretation of the work. While their animations are much more abstract than *CTRL*, I aim to emulate their bravery and determination in perplexing their audiences and shrouding each scene in so much mystery.

Overall, I have taken the liberty of creating a rather abstract animation, for I want the audience to ask more questions than provide answers to them, since there are very few certainties when it comes to discussing consciousness and AI.

Project Summary

Title: *CTRL*

Log line: A puppet-animated suspenseful short set in a future where programs can be uploaded into people's consciousness, a distrustful man defends himself from hijackers trying to take control of his mind.

Synopsis: While doing a security checkup inside his own consciousness, Otto falls face to face with a doppelganger trying to take control of his mind. Otto escapes his conscious aboard the NHB – the Neural Highway Browser – thus trapping the intruder inside his consciousness. Panicked and confused, Otto deletes and restores the last hour of his conscious, effectively erasing the doppelganger. He searches the internet for signs of mental hijackings and comes across an anti-virus software in the form of downloadable AIs. Suspicious of the AIs offered by the website, Otto uploads into his brain a blank AI and copies his own characteristics into it, thus creating a decoy. To allow the AI to copy his consciousness, Otto relinquishes power over his mind momentarily to the machine. Upon completing the copy process, Otto tries to regain control of his conscious, but is overpowered by his double, who, feeling threatened and disoriented, disappears aboard the NHB.

Themes

What makes a human conscious? What makes me “me”? Are we purely the collection of our characteristics, memories and beliefs? If everything we do is triggered by neurons being fired up in our brains, could we be controlled by external signals sent by extraneous devices? Would a machine that knows everything I know, believes everything I believe and remember everything I remember, be me? The two main themes of this animation are identity and control: identity relating to what makes a person themselves, and control relating to what makes a person have power over their own self.

By hiding the fact that Otto was, from the beginning of the story, an AI decoy, and that he is stuck in a loop within which dozens of decoys have cast out other AIs, the audience is being tricked into believing that an artificial intelligence is a “real” conscious human being. After the reveal, both concepts of identity and control, as well as what defines consciousness, are placed into doubt. In a world where minds can be modified like computer files, these concepts are made even more abstract than they already are – or not, for if we were able to modify our identities by reconfiguring our neurons, then we would be certain that identity relies on the structure and the contents of our minds.

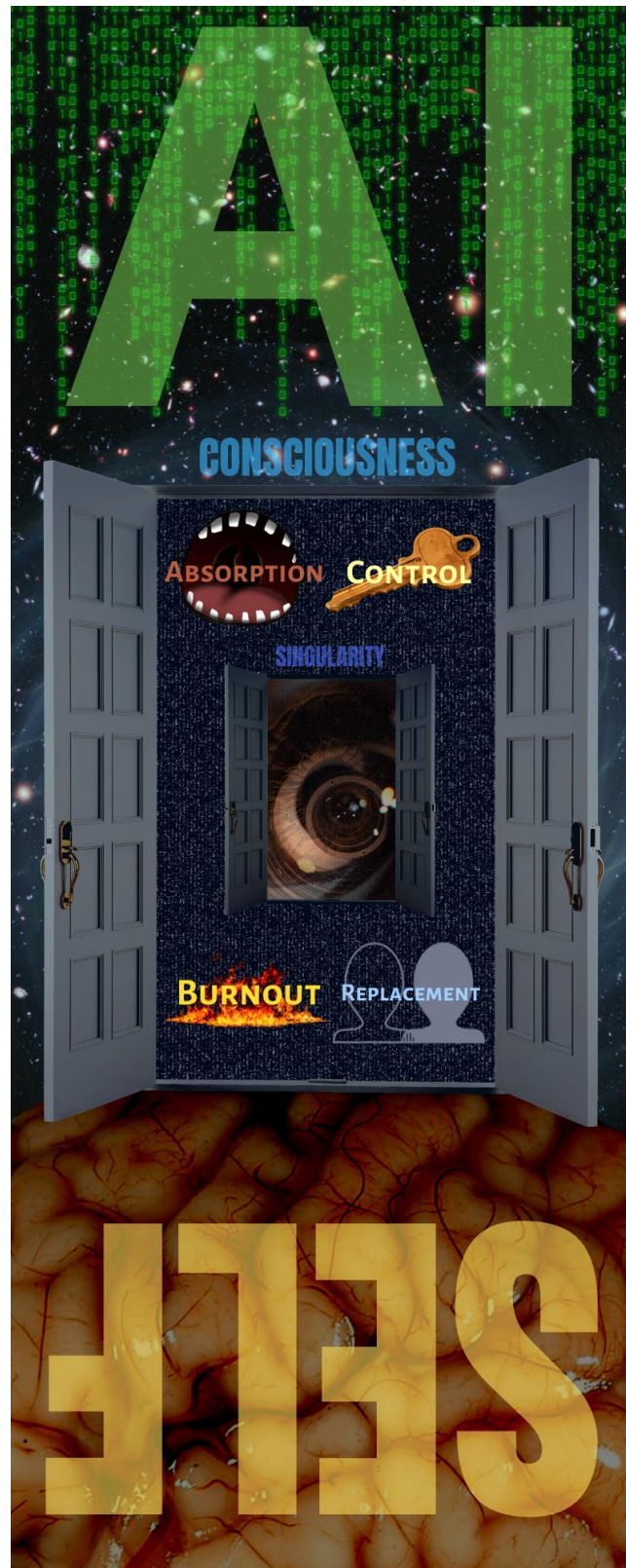
The concepts of identity and control are directly tied to consciousness. If an AI learned to behave *exactly* as another person behaves, would the AI be considered conscious? Perhaps not, for it is simply following the guidelines that define the person it is mimicking. However, what would be the difference? As soon as the AI is virtually the same as the person, it will be able to evolve in the same way as its human counterpart, and, as is the case with Otto, commit the same mistakes, as long as it is missing the information that would warn it of these missteps.

The universe

In the universe of this short animation, the human conscious is accessible as though it were a computer file. Information can be uploaded, deleted and copied from people's minds. Humanity has unlocked the ability to alter their brains and send very specific signals into it, like a more elaborate version of Elon Musk's Neuralink. By using the NHB, people can enter their own consciousness as if it were a large empty room inside their heads. The NHB then functions as a computer with an interface that is connected to the user's conscious. If an external actor manages to enter someone else's consciousness, the invaded person is at risk of being usurped, or of having information implanted into their brain.

Otto's consciousness takes the form of a large empty dark room à la *Get Out's* (2017) sunken place. It is an abstract place – a place out of space, a buffer between the physical and the spiritual worlds. Heavy breathing and muted heartbeats can be heard, while neurons flash dimly against the strangely busy void. Outside the protagonist's head, the world becomes disgusting. Otto's heavy dependence on sending his conscious into the world wide web has left him very uninterested in tending to his tiny room. Occupying most of the space is the NHB, which he uses to link his consciousness to the internet or to itself. The room is a sad testament to the most important element of Otto's life: sending his conscious anywhere but here.

Visualization



Script

The full script is available in my blog on the “Project Proposal – CTRL (Updated)” post.

Moodboard



Sound Design

The sound design within Otto's conscious and during both Ottos' consciousness trips is very abstract. Inside the protagonist's head, besides the heavy breathing and heartbeats, other eerie sounds, such as TV static and white noise, can be heard. Organic and mechanical sounds

are mixed, illustrating the misleadingly human nature of the machines and placing into doubt the concepts of consciousness and what it means to be human.

The soundtrack of the consciousness trips resembles that of *Koyaanisqatsi*'s (1982) "The Grid", which is quick and repetitive, and is accompanied by a crescendo of brass and stringed instruments, thus establishing a sense of great, impending change: the achievement of consciousness.

Otto's room, meanwhile, is quiet, save for the gentle buzzing of the NHB, which calls the protagonist back to it. The physical world has nothing to offer to Otto.

During the video advertisement of the anti-virus software (presented as a 2D, digital or top-down animation), everything, from the visuals to the soundscape, takes on a lighthearted aura, creating a jarring contrast between the child-like aesthetic of the video and the deeply serious idea of people hijacking others' consciousness.

List of hardware and software

Software:

-Sony Movie Studio Platinum 13.0 (Video editing)

-LMMS (Sound editing)

-Autodesk Sketchbook (2D, digital animation)

-Adobe Lightroom (Photo editing)

Hardware:

-Nikon DSLR camera (with integrated microphone)

-Tripod(s)

-Green screen

- Lamps (LED or with filters)
- XP-Pen Artist 10S drawing tablet (2D animation)
- Brass tubing, wires, foam, pre-wrap and plasticine clay (puppet-making)
- Cardboard, wood, plastic, various fabrics and plasticine clay (set-building)