

"strong AI" in the Whorl

The Whorl list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 20 Mar 2001

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/whorl/1276>

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Dan Parmenter — 20 Mar 2001, 16:35

From: William Ansley <wansley at warwick.net>

Maytera Rose was very old and sick and was only kept alive by means of the many prosthetic parts that had been surgically implanted in her body. When even these prostheses could no longer keep Rose alive, Maytera Marble claimed some of them as spare parts. In Wolfe's universe, robot and human parts are pretty much interchangeable. That robot parts could be used as prosthetic parts for humans and vice-versa is less silly than the idea that a robot (Jonas, in TNotNS) could be repaired with human flesh, but it still puts something of a strain on the reader's credulity (mine, at least).

Not mine. The notion that "robotics" and "prosthetics" are convergent technologies seems thoroughly acceptable to me. Wolfe describes chem anatomy in nearly human terms several times. It actually dovetails rather nicely with the fact that in Wolfe's Whorl we have both "AI" (chems) and "scanned consciousness." But I think that Wolfe the engineer couldn't resist the idea that perhaps even with these different "implementations" of consciousness there could be a common interface. I wouldn't be surprised to learn that the aspects of Maytera Rose's personality that are now present in Maytera Marble are AI simulations of Rose's thoughts. Among Rose's prosthetic parts were the mechanisms of speech (sorry, no citation). If the original Rose could not speak, then there must have been some method by which her thoughts were transmitted to her artificial speaking apparatus. It's not much of a leap from that to imagining an internal optimization whereby certain oft-used words, phrases, possibly even ideas could be "cached" within the speaking mechanism (or its software), e.g. her "devastating sniff."

The machine translation system I work on has a primitive mechanism whereby if a user favors a particular translation of a word or phrase this phrase is "learned" by giving it a small probability boost. This "learning data" can be saved externally so that when a user upgrades, the same learning data can be used. So when Rose died and Marble took her parts, the vocal apparatus no doubt included 10-20 years of saved data regarding how Rose spoke (and gestured, and thought perhaps). Presumably Marble could have asked that the Rose consciousness be expunged, but why bother recalibrating equipment that's already working just fine? "Strong" AI seems to be a recurring feature of the Lupiniverse. But surely there's more to consciousness than a bunch of statistical data on how often an individual used particular words or expressed particular thoughts? Or perhaps not. Remember, in UotNS we hear of locks on doors old enough that their personalities have started to diverge. Rose (through Marble) expresses her doubts about whether chems have consciousness (wonderful irony) and Mint expresses doubts to Remora (at the beginning of EXODUS) about whether Taluses have souls. Silk of course never seems to doubt "robot consciousness" for a moment and continues to feel guilt about having killed a Talus.

Mantis has speculated that perhaps Pike and Rose were Black Mechanics who experimented on their robot maid. I rather like this idea, though I'm not sure how much textual support there is

for it.

Shellac

*This is WHORL, for discussion of Gene Wolfe's Book of the Long Sun.