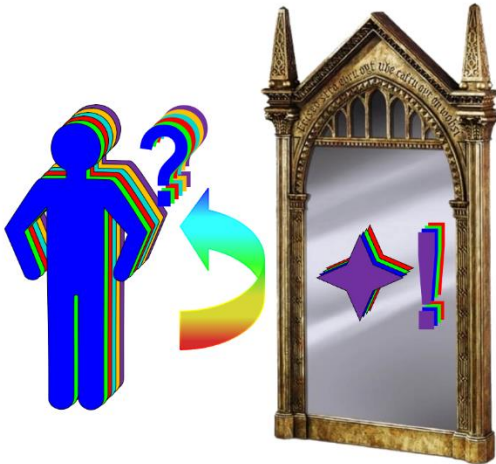


A Tale of Two Mirrors

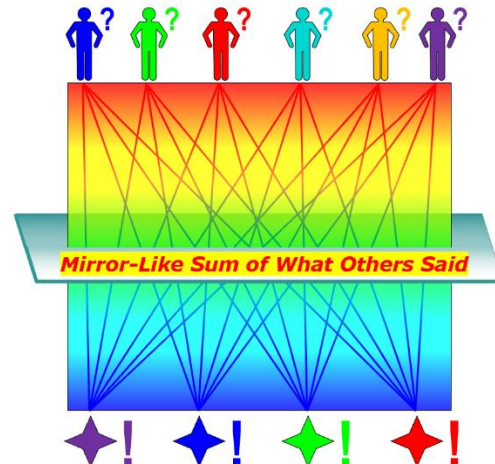
Terry Bollinger
2024-09-10.23:30 EST Tue

The Hogwarts Mirror of Erised



"[This mirror] shows us nothing more or less than the deepest, most desperate desire of our hearts. [It gives] us neither knowledge nor truth. Men have wasted away before it, entranced by what they have seen, or been driven mad, not knowing if what it shows is real or even possible."
— Albus Dumbledore

The Holographic Mirror of GenAI



This mirror shows us nothing more or less than our deepest, most desperate desire: Never again feel others know more than we do. It gives us neither full knowledge nor exact truth. One can waste away before it, entranced by the illusion of knowledge, or driven mad, not knowing if what it shows is real or even possible.

Why is GenAI so attractive even when it answers incorrectly? A deeper psychology of mirrors is involved.

In the Harry Potter books and movies, the Mirror of Erised enticed everyone looking into it with comforting, persuasive images of whatever their hearts desperately needed. For young Harry, it was images of his lost parents, while for Ron Weasley, it was success and acclaim in the game of Quidditch. Though Harry quickly realized the fraudulent nature of the mirror by comparing what he saw to images others observed, he could not resist sitting in front of the Mirror of Erised for hours at a time, watching and hoping for a reality he knew was not there.

Albus Dumbledore eventually had to take action, warning Harry of the insidious dangers of a mirror that in the past had wasted entire lives by entrancing people with visions that seemed plausible if only because the hearts of those who gazed in the mirror so deeply wanted them to be true.

Let's shift scenes: Imagine a world in which the Mirror of Erised is not some massive artifact hidden away in a secret room but a digital mirror available to all who desire it, regardless of age. What might happen?

We are, alas, about to find out.

Generative AI is, above all other things, a mirror. Like any mirror, it has no mind of its own. All it has is the images presented to it — the training — we've given it in the past. The main difference between GenAI mirrors and ordinary mirrors is that GenAI mirrors are *holographic*. These are mirrors with memories; in those memories, they blend similar images and concepts into a single canonical image. Like an optical hologram, viewers can peer at this sum of images from many angles and perspectives, giving them a breadth and degree of realism not available from the knowledge of just one individual. Yet despite the impressive breadth of these images, they remain nothing more

than reflections of what the mirror sees in those who use it. The novelty of such holographic mirrors stems from having a breadth of perspective seldom available to a single person.

And therein is the danger.

Like the Mirror of Erised, the holographic mirror of GenAI is just that: a mirror. It does not create. It does not intuit. It does not think. When pushed, it rolls the dice and shows creative combinations of images that are always creative, frequently beautiful, but seldom anything more than that: dice rolls. All a holographic mirror can do is reflect — and like the Mirror of Erised, its priority is to reflect whatever image it can find that makes the questioner's heart happiest. If you roll the dice too many times in a row — if you fall into the gambler's incantation that all those random dice roles must magically transform into an Emergent Sentience with abilities far beyond those of your marvelous and currently irreproducible mind — what you get is always the same: Increasingly random, but always pretty, hen scratches surrounded by claims of value that bear no relation to reality.

At that point, you are fully inside the mirror. You no longer know what is real or even possible.

Let us hope that not too many lives are wasted.

