THE MOBBOT LOGBOOK: Entry One // Session One

Time: August 29, 2020, 12.00 – 17.00.
Location: Code&share[ ] workspace, Høegh Guldbergsgade, Aarhus, Denmark.
Participants: Nathália Novais, Mace Ojala, Conrad Reuter, Paweł Gach, Christian Hagelskjær From, Anders Visti, and Malthe Stavning Erslev.

Notes: The session began with introductory notes on the background of the workshop. I gave a short introduction to bot-mimicry, followed by a short introduction to mob programming given by Christian.

We began mob programming, taking turns 'driving' the keyboard while the other participants gave instructions as to what to write. Most of the session went with technical setup of a server, including the setup of communication between individual clients and the central server. We discussed the design of MOBBOT largely through the metaphor of a game, in which someone needs to tell bots from humans, and we mostly discussed potential rulesets for such a game. We made some progress on the conceptual side, partly prompted by the technical setup. If bot-mimicry takes the form of a game, is it then a kind of (reversed) imitation game?

When setting up the server, we inadvertently came to discuss the relation between human clients and the bots that would also populate the software application. Firstly, we decided that the server would also be populated by bots, and that part of the premise for MOBBOT would be to stage a kind of relation between actual bots and bot-mimics. This led to a consideration of whether the bots should exist as 'rivaling' clients, trying to cloud the distinction between humans and bots, or if the bots should assist the humans in creating poignant, interesting, and engaging bot-mimicry. We decided on the second option, on creating a human-bot-alliance.

The notion of human-bot-alliance sustains the notion that bot-mimicry can be seen as a mimetic way of relating to AI agents, shifting attention away from measuring bots by their ability to trick humans, and focusing more on a collaborative relation between bots and humans, where antagonism is replaced with cooperation.

THE MOBBOT LOGBOOK: Entry Two // Session Two

Time: October 3, 2020, 12.00 – 17.00.
Location: Code&share[ ] workspace, Høegh Guldbergsgade, Aarhus, Denmark.
Participants: Nathália Novais, Winnie Soon, Gabriel Pereira, Anders Visti, and Malthe Stavning Erslev.

Notes: We spent quite some time discussing the conceptual side of the workshop series, including the design of MOBBOT and its relation to the wider field as well as to other imitation game-reworks. (Tellingly, the participants for this workshop were from within academia, and so the discussion took an academic turn, and we did not begin mob programming until after some time).

On the side of mob programming, we firstly took to finishing some of the work that we had left unfinished at the previous session, thus also continuing the design choices made there. Once we reached a more or less stable build, we decided to test it, conducting two impromptu tests of the software application: one in which each participant would verbally answer each other, either taking cues from their bot-ally or coming up with bot-esque statements themselves, and another in which we would project the chatroom onto a wall and run a conversation to see what would happen [cf. Figure 1, p. 5].

The two performances really shed light on the engaging nature of bot-mimicry. All the participants connected to the objective of speaking or writing in bot-esque styles, and we were all struck with the potential of MOBBOT as a platform for performance, i.e. not necessarily as a finished chatroom in which bot-mimicry happens, but perhaps (also) as a framework for a real-time networked performance of bot-mimicry. The nuances between these two options are vague, but important in the context of design: The first requires the design to reach a stable UI interface, while the latter can be operated from the barebones software as it is now, with minor alterations. Both options will be explored in our further work, and they are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

The performative potential of bot-mimicry leads me to consider the nature behind our collective engagement: it makes me wonder why we all connected to this style of writing, and what kind of mimesis is going on in such networked performances of bot-mimicry.

THE MOBBOT LOGBOOK: Entry Three // Session Three

Time: November 7, 2020, 12.00 – 17.00.
Location: Code&share[ ] workspace, Høegh Guldbergsgade, Aarhus, Denmark.
Participants: Heidi Nikolaisen, Christian Hagelskjær From, Anders Visti, and Malthe Stavning Erslev.

Notes: In this session, we focused mainly on the agency of the bot-ally. The mob programming approach, in which we tried to continually design in dialogue with the code, prompted us to reflect more decisively on the agency of the bot-ally. Specifically, we needed to formulate in computational terms the behavior of the bot-ally, which turned our attention to the question of whether the bot-ally should be more selective as to its participation in the conversation.

Following our interest in a collaborative approach from the first workshop session, we wanted the bot to only respond to some rather than all posts in the chatroom. In other words, we did not want to subjugate the bot to the will of the human, but to create a collaborative relation between the human and the bot, in which the bot-mimicry happens as a cooperation between a human and an actual computational system.

The issue of giving the bot a more selective agency sparked interesting discussions. The emphasis on selective agency on the side of the bot-ally also affects the power dynamics between user and bot. When the bot is not available at all times to the human, the user is forced to produce bot-esque text when the bot is 'uninterested' in the general topic of conversation. Might the bot-ally function as teacher, showing the user the style of automated writing, which the human then has to incorporate in their own understanding of bots/AI by way of incorporating it in their bot-mimicry, i.e. their writing practices?

My guess is we have to pursue this line of development a bit more, and test it in practice, to see what it means for MOBBOT. This kind of experimentation would have specific significance for my theoretical account of bot-mimicry: is bot-mimicry best done without a bot-ally, by editing the bot-ally's suggestions, or by using the bot-ally's suggestions as guidance and inspiration for our own performance of bot-mimicry?