Microsoft's GitHub to add OpenAI chat functions to coding tool
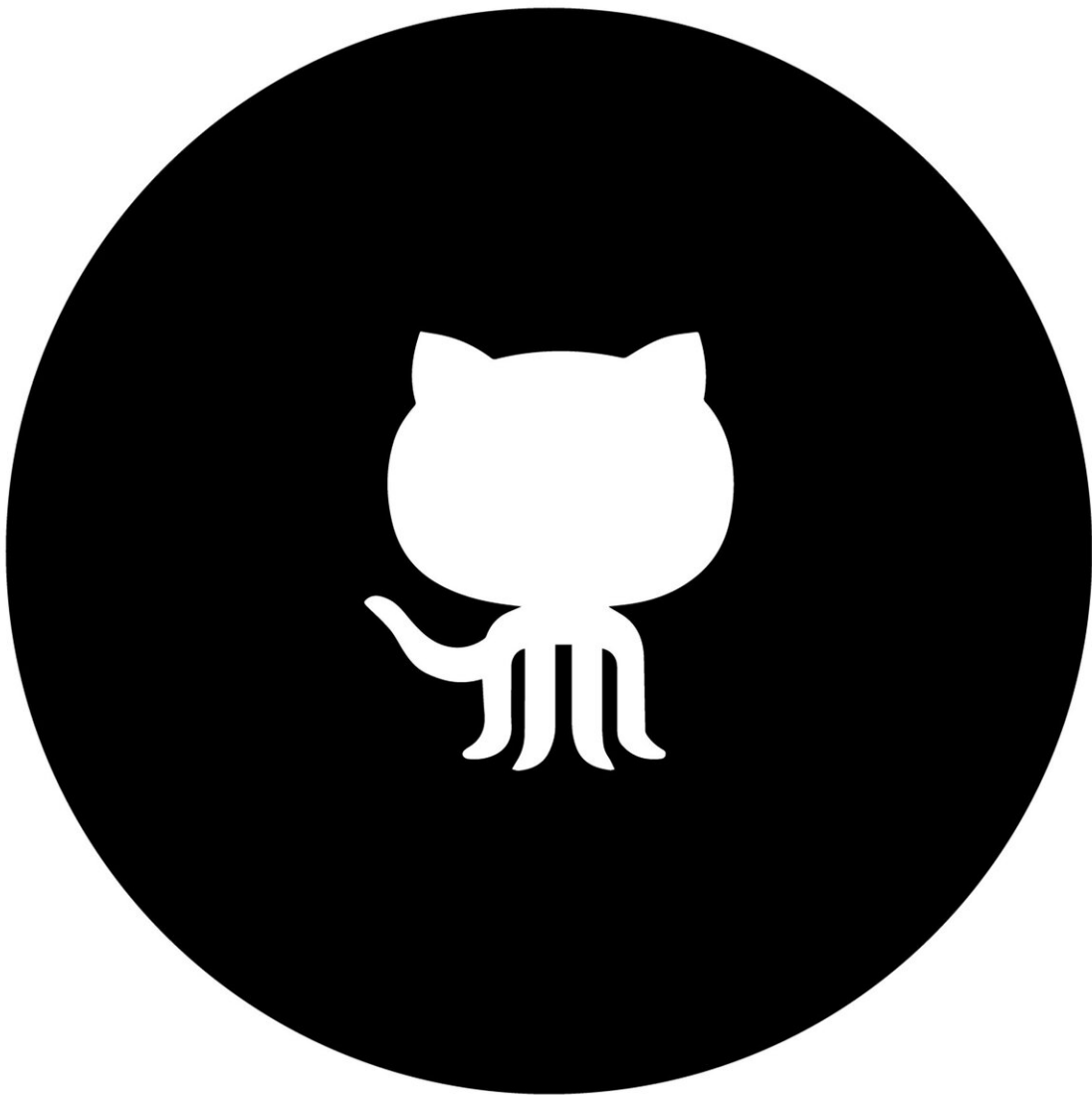
March 22 2023, by Dina Bass

Microsoft Corp.'s GitHub unit created one of the first widely deployed programs using OpenAI's language-generation tools—an app called Copilot that helped software developers write computer code. Now GitHub is adding a chat and voice feature that will let programmers ask how to accomplish certain coding tasks.

The new version announced Wednesday is called Copilot X, which GitHub Chief Executive Officer Thomas Dohmke said he demonstrated to one of his children by asking it how to program a snake game in Python. The chat window can provide explanations of what segments of code are meant to do, create ways to test the code and propose fixes for bugs. Developers can also give instructions or ask questions using their voice.

GitHub first previewed Copilot in 2021 and widely released it last year. The initial product contained a completion tool that suggested snippets of programming code as a software developer typed. It attracted hundreds of thousands of developers by November and its product name had become short-hand for Microsoft's strategy to deploy these kinds of assistive technologies to a wide array of its products, from Office software to security programs.

Now that OpenAI's ChatGPT chatbot has made a splash in popular culture, companies are trying to follow Microsoft in embedding the research lab's tools into products and business strategies. At the same time, rivals such as Alphabet Inc.'s Google are releasing chatbot competitors.

GitHub will also start using OpenAI's latest language model—GPT

4—in the product. The company plans to use different AI models for different tasks. The code-completion features, which demand an AI that's speedy in order not to interrupt a developers programming flow, will keep using older technology that optimizes pace rather than perfect accuracy. The chat features will use the newer GPT-4, which OpenAI says has higher accuracy rates, Dohmke said.

Developers can sign up for a waitlist to preview the new service. Dohmke said he is hopeful the software can be used for education. He is scheduled Wednesday to join a professor using Copilot at Duke University.

"It removes the frustration from learning because as a student the most frustrating part is in the beginning of semester everybody needs to have the same knowledge level, but they don't," he said. "With a Copilot, you can actually ramp them up really quickly and will revolutionize how we learn."

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