

Portrait of a Google AI art project as a poetic you

4 May 2019, by Nancy Cohen



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Roses are red violets are blue, AI writing poems? Can't be true. Or can it? And if so, how low can we go in expectations? Brush low expectations aside for now, as Google is on to something special, and that is, AI for self-portrait poetry.

Self-portrait [poetry](#)? London-based artist and stage designer Es Devlin in a video tells you how it works. Everyone is invited to donate a word for a collective poem. CHAOS. COMPLEX. ASCENDING. Those are some of the words already voiced.

The poem is generated by means of an algorithm trained on words of 19th century poetry, so, each word that you add to it will combine with the other elements.

"Following a year of touring as a physical installation, Es Devlin's POEMPORTRAITS is launching online as an interactive artwork combining poetry, design and artificial intelligence. Donate a word that defines you at g.co/poemportraits to create your own unique POEMPORTRAIT and join the collective poem written by the public and AI."

How does it work? Each donated word is expanded into a two-line poem, generated by an algorithm trained on millions of words of 19th century poetry.

Devlin had instructions, too, on a blog. "To create your POEMPORTRAIT, head to g.co/poemportraits. Once you get there, you'll be asked to donate a word of your choice and to take a self portrait... You'll then receive a unique POEMPORTRAIT of your [face](#), illuminated by your original lines of poetry. All of the lines of poetry are then combined to form an ever-evolving, collective poem."

(*Engadget*: The AI asks you to "donate" a word and take a selfie. Your word will then be expanded into original lines of poetry...Your [visage](#) will then be illuminated by these original lines of poetry.")

She works with Google Arts and Culture. In a blog, Devlin spoke about the technology behind POEMPORTRAITS. She collaborated with Google Arts and Culture Lab and Ross [Goodwin](#). He has the title of creative technologist at Google.

If that job title sounds odd, Goodwin's kind of expertise is special. He is focused on computational creative writing, or generative text. He trained an algorithm to learn to write poems by reading over 25 million words written by 19th century poets.

"It works a bit like predictive text," said Devlin, and "it doesn't copy or rework existing phrases, but uses its training material to build a complex [statistical model](#)." The algorithm is generating original phrases *emulating* the style of what it's been trained on.

Devlin's own reaction to the poetry she is seeing: "The resulting poems can be surprisingly poignant, and at other times [nonsensical](#)."

Paul Lilly in *HotHardware* weighed in. "I'm not sure

if Google is using this information for some bigger purpose, but certainly AI is growing in importance—it's used in variety of applications, from predictive healthcare and the study of weather patterns, to self-driving vehicles and now [poetry](#)."

Tyler Lee in *Ubergizmo* commented that "if you've always wanted a [poem](#) that was created specifically for you, Google is here to help...an AI will use an algorithm to create a piece of poetry that is uniquely yours. Of course, whether or not this makes sense to you is up to your [interpretation](#) of it, but it does seem like a fun little project."

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