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ROBOT JOURNALISM: THE WHAT-IF MACHINE



Aerie Pharmaceuticals Inc. (AERI) on Tuesday reported a loss of \$13.1 million in its third quarter. The Research Triangle Park, North Carolina-based company said it had a loss of 54 cents per share. Losses, adjusted for stock option expense, came to 44 cents per share.

Did you notice anything unusual about the above news report? This snippet published by AP might not be a particularly riveting piece of writing, but it's still pretty impressive when you consider it wasn't written by a human.

In [issue #16](#) of *Delayed Gratification*, our associate editor [Matthew Lee](#) introduced us to the growing 'robot journalism' industry. Automated journalism such as the above article is generated by algorithms applied to standardised sets of data.

Thanks to Wordsmith, the programme that generated Aerie Pharmaceuticals' Q3 report, AP is now publishing 4,440 corporate-earnings stories per quarter. They managed 300 per quarter when they still relied on mere humans.

Despite these algorithms' ability to churn out enormous amounts of news reports that are "accurate, detailed and mercifully to-the-point," Matthew concluded that robots are still "rubbish at the human bits of journalism – empathy, sympathy, warmth, understanding and finding great quotes to present in large, fetching type."

But can machines be creative enough to inspire works of art? That's what scientists at the

What If Project are trying to find out. Their first and second versions of the ‘What-If Machine’ generate ideas for cultural artefacts, such as poems, music and paintings.

As Matthew explained in his feature, the What-If Machine “takes big data – in this case a bank of documents totalling 100 million words – and seeks commonalities in their language so it can learn how words are connected together.” The result: computer-generated ‘what if’ propositions – with varying degrees of coherence.

We asked the What-If Machine to create a Kafkaesque plot based on a machine and got: “What if an automaton appeared in a residence, and suddenly became a cat that was able to write?”

This Disney plot makes more sense, but is hardly original: “What if there was a little instrument who couldn’t find the musician?”

The What-If Machine isn’t quite there yet, but is a lot of fun to play around with in that post-lunch creativity slump. See what ideas you get on the What-If Machine’s latest iteration, [here](#).

Want to read Matthew’s full feature on the rise of robot journalism? Order issue #16 of DG in our [shop](#).

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