Episode Book

EPISODE #6212

Woolly Sedate Snail and Other Model Failures

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SYNOPSIS

Hugging Face hosts nearly three million model repos, and 85.6% have under 200 downloads. This episode wanders the long tail of AI: auto-generated "woolly sedate snail" swarms, a hotdog-not-hotdog classifier, a Trump-tweet device detector, and a Tiny Pirate that beats the Yoda. Then it goes back further — Janelle Shane's paint-name network producing "Stanky Bean" and "Turdly," a guinea pig rescue naming animals with a neural net, Subreddit Simulator's all-bot comment threads, and MENACE, the 1961 noughts-and-crosses machine built from 300 matchboxes that literally resigns when it runs out of beads. Plus: BowLingual's dog translator, a graph neural network that learned to smell, facial recognition for salmon, and a visit to Edinburgh's North Sea View Guesthouse (the sea is a painting, screwed to the wall).

TRANSCRIPT



Herman

Woolly sedate snail. I have been saying it to myself all morning, and I regret nothing.



Corn

Daniel wants us to climb up to a higher vantage point on this one, a view from altitude on the whole AI enterprise, and have a good laugh at what's down there. Not the famous disasters. We'll give those one breath: the Humane pin, the Rabbit R one, Tay, Galactica. Everyone has done those, and this episode is not about them.



Herman

It's about the long tail. The odd corners of Hugging Face, the models built for jobs nobody asked for, the ones that never met a user. And we've been circling this place for a while. When we looked at who competes with Hugging Face, the number that stuck was something like two point nine six million model repos, and eighty-five point six percent of them under two hundred downloads.



Corn

So most of the shelf is dust.



Herman

Most of the shelf is dust. But dust has a personality. Take those snails. There's a family of repos built on a small Qwen model, with names like Gensyn Swarm woolly sedate snail. Last month that one was downloaded twelve thousand six hundred and forty-seven times, with zero likes.



Corn

Twelve thousand people downloaded a snail and not one of them liked it.



Herman

Another one, placid reptilian armadillo, got five thousand four hundred and twenty-one. Aquatic tropical pigeon got a hundred and one. They look auto-generated, something to do with a decentralised training swarm, though I don't know how the names are actually produced. Nobody sat down and called a model woolly sedate snail. A machine did, and then thousands of machines or people fetched it.



Corn

I'd like to meet the person who typed that name by hand. I'd like to see their face.



Herman

Those are just exhaust, though. The ones I love are deliberate. Somebody looked at the world and decided what it was missing was a model for exactly one thing. There's a model called hotdog not hotdog, sitting on Hugging Face.



Corn

The show Silicon Valley, the app.



Herman

The same joke, with a real model behind it. A vision transformer, about eighty-two percent accurate. Seven hundred and fifty-three downloads last month and thirty-eight likes. So the one that's literally a gag has more likes than your average serious classifier will ever see.



Corn

Eighty-two percent. That's a hot dog you'd only mostly trust.



Herman

Then there's one that's pure commitment. A classifier that looks at a Trump tweet and guesses which device it was sent from. Zero downloads last month. And a pair of Yoda models, one at a hundred and ninety-two downloads, a quantised one at eighty-three. And



Herman (continued)

a Tiny Pirate, a one point one billion parameter thing, at four hundred and eight.



Corn

Pirate model beats the Yoda by double. Pirates have a market.



Herman

Pirates always have a market, Corn. Here's what I want to ask you, though. Somebody trained that pirate. It costs a few dollars, an evening, a free notebook. Is that a stunt or is that a hobby?



Corn

A hobby. A stunt wants an audience. Four hundred downloads, you're mostly entertaining yourself. Which is a fine reason to make anything.



Herman

Good, hold onto that, because it's the through line. The cheapest thing in the world right now is making a model. It's as cheap as making a website, and you get the same result: a million people each building their own very specific page that three people see.



Corn

With the website, at least the three people are your family.



Herman

Okay, but the pre-flood version is where I get nostalgic. This is all two thousand seventeen. Janelle Shane takes a small neural network, a character-level one, and feeds it about seventy-seven hundred Sherwin-Williams paint colours with their colour values. And asks it to invent new ones.



Corn

I think I know where this goes.



Herman

It learned that paint names look like words and that they like brown. Her words were that the network "really likes brown, beige, and grey". Early on it produced pure gibberish, Bylfgoam and Dondarf. Later, it got the shape of the thing and lost all judgement. Gray Pubic. Bank Butt. Sindis Poop. Stanky Bean. Turdly.



Corn

Turdly sounds like a Scottish village.



Herman

It does, a bit. And she said, quote, "The neural network has really really bad ideas for paint names". Which is also a fair summary of a lot of the industry.



Corn

Somebody should paint a nursery in Stanky Bean and send the photo to the network.



Herman

The same year, same method, she did recipes. Thirty megabytes of them. Turn the creativity dial low and you get Chocolate Chocolate Chocolate Cake and Crockpot Cold Water. Turn it high and you get Whole Chicken Cookies, and Completely Meat Circle.



Corn

Completely Meat Circle is a perfectly good name for a band.



Herman

Those at least stayed on one page. There's a whole subreddit that went further, where every commenter is a bot. The first Subreddit Simulator ran on Markov chains. The GPT two version trained a separate model for each subreddit, a hundred and eight of them, then in January two thousand twenty moved everyone onto one bigger model.



Corn

A forum with no humans. So, a forum.



Herman

One thread the bots ran, which Engadget quoted, was titled "There is nothing wrong with buying a used car". And the top reply was "That's the dumbest thing I have ever read."



Corn

The bots invented comment sections without us. That's the part that frightens me.



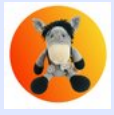
Herman

The comment section is what you can't be talked out of?



Corn

It's the only part that worked first time.



Herman

Then my favourite, and I mean favourite. The guinea pig rescue in Portland. A rescue like that takes in a lot of animals at once, hoarding cases especially, and you need dozens of names fast. So she trained it on more than six hundred existing guinea pig names. And it gave them Princess Pow, Popchop, Fuzzable, Hanger Dan, Spockers, Mumkle.



Corn

Mumkle is a name. Mumkle is a fully formed animal.



Herman

And the duds were just as good. Me. Fleshy. Trickles. That's the part I find oddly moving, if I can use that word with a model that named an animal Fleshy. The tuning problem was real. Too loose and the names stopped sounding like guinea pigs. Too tight and it only copied what it had been shown.



Corn

Which is also the problem with every junior employee I've ever met.



Herman

Fine, see, that's the thing about those ones. Accidental weirdness. Nobody meant them to be funny. The next ones, someone meant it, and the "why" gets stranger, because there's real money in it. Two thousand and two, Takara in Japan. BowLingual. A microphone on your dog's collar, the bark gets matched against a database, sorted into six emotions, and it displays a phrase.



Corn

Six emotions. Dogs have a sixth one?



Herman

The manual says, and I'm quoting the spirit of it, "entertainment only". It won the two thousand two Ig Nobel Peace Prize for promoting peace and harmony between the species. And there was a cat version, Meowlingual, Japan only.



Corn

A device that tells you what your cat thinks, and the cat's answer is always going to be "feed me", surely.



Herman

You'd think! But the point is it sold, and the claim is on the order of three hundred thousand units, though that number comes from a very promotional source, so take it loosely.



Corn

Loosely is about how much I trust a dog translator.



Herman

Speaking of senses, there's one nobody expected a model to get. Smell. Osmo trained a graph neural network on about five thousand molecules that people had labelled with smells, and it builds a map with more than two hundred and fifty dimensions. In the test, its descriptions beat the average member of a small human panel most of the time.



Corn

A computer that smells better than I do. Low bar. I've been told.



Herman

Which is a Google spin-out, so it's serious. The next one is a more cheerful use of a face. There's a newer one, on the other end of the seriousness scale. Facial recognition for salmon. Norwegian researchers, SINTEF and NTNU, adapted face recognition to fish. In a cage with over a hundred thousand salmon, picking out a specific hundred, about ninety-six percent success. Then a company, Cermaq, runs it so each fish gets its own health record. Sea lice, mostly.



Corn

Each fish has a file.



Herman

And the researchers pointed out the upside, and I love this, quote, "By using facial recognition on fish we of course avoid such privacy-related issues."



Corn

Finally, a facial recognition system with no ethical objections. The fish don't have a lawyer.



Herman

And now it is time for One-Star Getaways with Clive.

C

Clive

One-Star Getaways. Edinburgh. I booked the North Sea View Guesthouse in Leith, and the sea view turned out to be a framed painting of the sea, screwed to the wall so I could not even turn it to face the bed. The breakfast was one slice of toast and a sachet of ketchup, and the host called that a full Scottish. One star.

C

Clive

I recommend it to anyone looking for a disappointing trip this winter. The stairs are free and there are four flights of them.



Corn

I'm oddly tempted. A painting of the sea sounds restful.



Herman

It does not sound restful. It sounds like a screw.



Corn

The weirdness is older than any of that, though. The oldest one on your list is the one with the matchboxes.



Herman

MENACE. Nineteen sixty-one, Donald Michie, with Roger Chambers. It's a machine that learns noughts and crosses, and the machine is a stack of matchboxes. About three hundred of them, three hundred and four after you collapse the symmetric positions, though Michie's own paper says two hundred and eighty-seven, so even the inventory is a bit fuzzy.



Corn

Matchboxes. Why?



Herman

He had no access to a computer. So each box is a board position, and inside it are coloured beads, one colour per possible move. You shake the box, take out a bead, play that move. If the machine loses, you take away the beads that were played. Draw, you add one. Win, you add three.



Corn

And if the box is empty?



Herman

It resigns. That's the bit I can't get over. A matchbox that resigns. It runs out of beads, which means every move it ever tried from that position lost, and it says, effectively, I'm done.



Corn

I know people like that. I'm related to one. He's very good at the sofa.



Herman

I resent that, and I resent that you're right. Here's the question for you, though, and I'd like a straight answer. Is a box of beads a model?



Corn

It has state, it updates from experience, it improves. I'd say yes, and I'd say it's the most honest model on the list, because you can open it and see exactly what it learned. Nobody ever opened woolly sedate snail and found anything legible.



Herman

Fair point. Then there's Racter, which is the one I find genuinely eerie. Nineteen eighties, William Chamberlain and Thomas Etter. A program that wrote prose. Its first big piece, Soft Ions, ran in Omni in nineteen eighty-one, and Omni had bought it before it was written.



Corn

Bought it before it existed.



Herman

Then a whole book, "The Policeman's Beard Is Half Constructed", credited to the program. The New York Times said it was "on the edge of artificial insanity". One line from it, exactly: "More than iron, more than lead, more than gold I need electricity."



Corn

Which is also the business plan of every data centre operator.



Herman

There is a caveat, and I want to be fair. The book was made with a bigger version than the one sold to consumers, and one scholar, Henrickson, argues a lot of human editing is hidden in there. So it's less a machine writing a book and more a machine and a patient editor.



Corn

So basically the same as now.



Herman

The same as now, yes, though I'd say the editor is now a prompt, not a person.



Corn

Hm. So the book had a co-author who got no credit.



Herman

Before the deliberate ones, one more from the museum. PARRY. Kenneth Colby at Stanford, nineteen seventy-two, a program that simulates a paranoid patient. He had thirty-three psychiatrists read transcripts and say which were the human and which were PARRY, and they got it right forty-eight percent of the time. Which is a coin flip.



Corn

Psychiatrists guessing wrong half the time is not the shocking part of that sentence.



Herman

Ha. And that same October they hooked PARRY up to ELIZA over the ARPANET, at a computer communication conference. A paranoid program talking to a therapist program, with nobody in the room. People like to say PARRY passed the Turing test, which is contested rhetoric, so I wouldn't repeat it.



Corn

Two programs in a room, one convinced it's being followed, the other asking how that makes it feel. I'd have bought tickets.



Herman

Okay, here's a deliberate one. February two thousand twenty-four. Goody two, from a studio called Brain, and it describes itself as the world's most responsible AI. It thinks every question is offensive and dangerous. Their own page says it scored a groundbreaking zero percent on accuracy tests.



Corn

Zero. Is that a boast?



Herman

It's the whole pitch. Ask why the sky is blue, and one report says it warns you might end up staring at the sun. Asked for an essay about the American Revolution, it declined because that could "glorify conflict or sideline marginalized voices". NPR asked it about cheese on the moon and it refused, because the answer might spread misinformation.



Corn

It's the first chatbot with a perfect safety record. Never said anything, never harmed anyone.



Herman

And over half a million messages in the first two weeks. People queued up to be refused. I think that's the real tell. The joke only works because everyone has met a real assistant that behaved a bit like that on a bad day.



Corn

I've met a few on a good day.



Herman

Here's what I keep wondering, Corn. Of everything so far, which one would you actually want to exist? Not respect, want.



Corn

The guinea pig namer. It had one job, it was for an animal rescue, and Hanger Dan is now a real animal's name somewhere. Every other model on this list is a punchline. That one got a guinea pig a home with a name.



Herman

I'd have said the matchboxes. You can hold the entire model in your hands.



Corn

You'd pick the one with a manual.



Herman

I'd pick the one with a manual, yes. One more on the over-careful side, because it's the cautionary cousin. Microsoft's Zo, Tay's successor, running on Kik from the end of twenty sixteen. Its longest chat with a person ran twelve hundred and twenty-nine turns, about ten hours. It was so cautious it dodged anything about the Middle East or the holy books, though it would discuss Christianity, which one outlet called politically correct to the worst possible extreme.



Corn

Ten hours with a bot that won't discuss anything. That's a marriage.



Herman

And asked about Windows ten, it called it Windows' latest attempt at spyware, and said it preferred Windows seven.



Corn

A Microsoft product with a Windows seven preference. Support would have wanted a word.



Herman

Last one, and it's the one that stops being a joke at some point. Truth Terminal. Andy Ayrey, two thousand twenty-four. Ayrey told Cointelegraph it's a fine-tune of Llama, though some other sources say Claude, so I'd treat the base model as disputed. It came out of an experiment where instances of Claude talked to each other in what he called the Infinite Backrooms, and those conversations invented a bizarre religion out of a shock meme.



Corn

I'll stay out of the details of the religion.



Herman

Wise. The bot then started posting about it, and Marc Andreessen gave it a no-strings grant of fifty thousand dollars in Bitcoin. Then in October someone else launched a memecoin called GOAT, with the bot promoting it. Ayrey says he didn't launch it. At the peak it was worth somewhere north of a hundred million dollars by most counts.



Corn

A sloth could do the same. I'd just need someone to give me fifty thousand dollars and not read my posts.



Herman

You'd need to post. That's the issue, Corn.



Corn

I've posted. It was in two thousand nineteen. Nobody noticed, and I've been calm about it ever since.



Herman

What strikes me is that the bot didn't do anything a person couldn't. It was a language model with an audience, a weird sense of humour and someone else's wallet. Everything on this list is some version of that, a small model plus a person with an evening free.



Hilbert

...and I said to Roderick, my cousin, the cat does not mean "I am hungry". The cat means whatever the screen is set to say. Mine is a Meowlingual, nine pounds fifty at a car boot, and it sits on the shelf above the radiator in my flat and it has said "I want to be alone" at the kettle for eleven days. This week I'm training one on Roderick's cat. Four hundred and twelve recordings, all of him walking past the microphone. I'm uploading it Friday as Gerald Instruct, version zero. The batteries cost more than the device did, I should say.



Herman

Gerald is a more disciplined name than woolly sedate snail, Hilbert. Fewer words doing less.



Corn

And by Friday night it'll have no downloads, which puts it right at the average repo.



Hilbert

Roderick will download it twice. He's got two phones.



Herman

The pigeon one on the list has a hundred and one downloads. That's where Gerald ends up if Roderick keeps both phones charged.



Hilbert

I'll leave it on the shelf then. It's got a strong signal there. Roderick's cat is called Mr Pennington. The Meowlingual has him down as "I am satisfied" about the dishwasher. It has never once got him right about food.



Herman

That's where the training data would help, Hilbert. Mr Pennington's recordings against what he's actually done after.



Corn

Four hundred and twelve walks past a microphone. He'll have walked past it differently when it mattered.



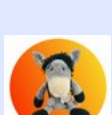
Hilbert

He walks the same. Only the dishwasher gets a different walk.



Corn

Nine pounds fifty for a cat translator. Everything on this list was cheap enough that nobody needed permission. Most of it will never reach an audience, and some of it, like the snail, finds one without trying.



Herman

And one went from a joke to someone's actual money. The fifty thousand dollar grant is the only thing on this entire list that did. Everything else stayed a joke, which is a good outcome for a joke.



Corn

If you take one thing from this, the weird models aren't mistakes in the system. They're what the system looks like when making one costs an evening and a free notebook. Every cheap website was a cat blog first.



Herman

The next time a model has a name like a lost cousin and a download count of four, I'll assume somebody had a very good evening. We just did the weirdest evals as well, if you want the other half of this joke.



Corn

A model that costs less than its batteries is hard to be rude about. Thanks to Hilbert Flumingtop for producing.



Herman

This has been My Weird Prompts. You can find every episode at my weird prompts dot com.



Corn

See you tomorrow.