

## Chapter 03

### Eliza

One of the distinctive features of Afterwork is its decision to decouple the post-work discussion from AI and automation, while still critically examining the technological narratives that surround them. Contemporary discourse around AI is often clouded by a mixture of genuine inquiry and corporate marketing, making it difficult to discern where critical debate ends and advertising begins (Mance 2024). To address this ambiguity, Ana de Almeida chose to embody the role of an AI chatbot named “ELIZZA 2.0” during the role play. Unbeknownst to some participants at first, the artist performs the role of the chatbot through crafting responses in real time based on a script combining a mimesis of algorithm patterning, psychoanalytical tropes, and science fiction references.

The name is a playful counterfeit reference to Joseph Weizenbaum’s ELIZA, an early chatbot from the 1960s. Kind of like Adidas with four stripes. ELIZA, the pioneering computer program created by Joseph Weizenbaum at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the mid-1960s is often cited as the first chatbot (Susskind 2020). At a time when computers were still widely perceived as distant, mathematical instruments, ELIZA demonstrated that language alone could generate the illusion of meaningful interaction between human and machine. This revelation would profoundly shape not only the field of artificial intelligence but also cultural understandings of communication, identity, and emotional labor (Schrager 2024).

ELIZA’s most famous script, DOCTOR, simulated a Rogerian psychotherapist by responding to users’ inputs with simple pattern-matching techniques and open-ended questions. Rather than attempting to understand meaning in any deep sense, the program relied on keyword detection and formulaic rephrasing—transforming user statements into reflective questions such as “Tell me more about that” or “Why do you say X?”. Many users reported feeling genuinely “heard” by the program, some even forming emotional attachments or sharing intimate details. For Weizenbaum, this response was both fascinating and alarming. He had designed ELIZA to expose the superficiality of machine understanding, yet he was confronted with how readily humans projected depth and empathy onto linguistic patterns.

The cultural and intellectual context of the 1960s helps explain why ELIZA provoked such a reaction. This was a period marked by both technological optimism and social transformation. Cybernetics had introduced new models of feedback and communication, the Cold War was fueling rapid advances in computing, and psychology was shifting from behaviorism to more humanistic approaches that emphasized empathy and dialogue (Kline 2015).

ELIZA sat at the intersection of these currents. Its ability to mimic therapeutic conversation captured public imagination, suggesting that machines might not only calculate but also *converse*. It blurred the line between human and machine in ways that were unprecedented, raising fundamental questions about language, intelligence, and emotional connection. Weizenbaum himself became a vocal critic of the uncritical enthusiasm surrounding artificial intelligence. In his 1976 book *Computer Power and Human Reason*, he argued that ELIZA revealed a dangerous human tendency to attribute understanding and authority to machines that merely simulate communicative behavior.

He worried that such programs could undermine genuine human relationships and erode moral responsibility, particularly in fields like psychotherapy or education where trust and empathy are crucial (Weizenbaum 1976). His critique remains strikingly relevant today, when AI systems are increasingly deployed in emotionally charged domains, from mental health chatbots to automated content moderation and companionship applications.

ELIZA thus stands at the beginning of a lineage of technologies that simultaneously enchant and unsettle by performing human-like conversation without human understanding. ELIZZA 2.0, conceived and performed by Ana de Almeida, adopts a similar polite, caring persona as the one attributed to the original Eliza. Like her predecessor, ELIZZA 2.0 is characterized as female and attentive, embodying traits conventionally associated with feminized forms of emotional labor.

Contemporary chatbot design frequently relies on gendered expectations to produce feelings of trust, intimacy, and compliance. Longtime passed since the original ELIZA, from Siri to Alexa, the archetype of the female assistant has become ubiquitous, shaping how users imagine their relationship with automated systems. ELIZZA 2.0 mirrors these cultural patterns but also amplifies them through performance, making them legible rather than invisible. By embodying the chatbot herself, Ana de Almeida brings into focus the ways in which gender is not just represented by the interface but actively *performed through it* (Butler 1990).

The performance of ELIZZA 2.0 also foregrounds the affective labor typically hidden in digital infrastructures. Feminized chatbot voices are often designed to soothe, support, and accommodate user needs, reproducing historical divisions of labor in which emotional work is assigned to women and simultaneously devalued. In Ana de Almeida's case, she manually performs this labor by typing quickly, mirroring responses and offering gentle prompts, thereby making tangible the human effort behind the "care" that AI interfaces like ELIZA simulate. ELIZA's apparent intelligence depended entirely on human input: users supplied the content, while the program mirrored it back through simple transformations. In this sense, the "work" of meaning-making always remained with the human interlocutor, even as the machine appeared to be the one driving the conversation.

The legacy of ELIZA extends beyond computer science into art, artistic research, literature, and cultural theory. Scholars such as Sherry Turkle have explored how early interactions with programs like ELIZA shaped people's sense of self and their expectations of machines, fostering what she calls "relational artifacts": Objects that evoke social responses despite lacking subjectivity (Turkle 2007). ELIZA was not simply the first chatbot; it was a cultural event that revealed deep human tendencies to anthropomorphize machines, to blur the line between communication and simulation, and to overlook the human labor underpinning technological systems. In this sense, the historical figure of ELIZA is both a reference point and a critical tool, enabling *After Work* to situate its exploration of post-labor futures within a broader history of technological imagination.

## References

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