

# GHOSTS IN THE MACHINES:

How eeriness and otherworldliness  
can help us navigate our  
information ecosystem

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# THE PLAN FOR today

1. Problem: the seductiveness of clarity
2. Seduction, trust, and illusions in the information sphere
3. A suggestion: “embrace vagueness”
4. Develop this suggestion: not vagueness, but *eeriness*
5. Eeriness, life advice, and fairytales
6. Eeriness as antidote to the seductions of clarity

# The context

(Proviso: aimed at end users, not policy or structure)

We are often overwhelmed by both the volume and varying quality of informational content.

There's practical value to a signal to halt investigations.

BUT... 'seductions of clarity' can work against our interests as knowers.

# Seduction in informational contexts

C. Thi Nguyen's central claim: The feeling of clarity presents a dangerous vulnerability in human cognition.

Qualifier: Focuses on hostile epistemology, not blaming the victim. "It is a study in the vulnerabilities of limited, constrained cognitive agents, and how environmental features might exploit those vulnerabilities."

("The Seductions of Clarity", 2021, p. 229)

# Some HELPFUL terms FROM NGUYEN

The **feeling of clarity** signals but is distinct from genuine understanding.

**Seduction** occurs when a hostile manipulator subverts our aims by securing our consent.

**Clarity** serves as a thought- and inquiry-terminator. (This can be useful but is exploitable for bad ends.)

**Hostile manipulation** occurs when a feeling of clarity is triggered to terminate processes of thinking and inquiry too early (for our aims).

# How clarity mimics understanding

(Genuine) understanding involves systems, connections between facts, using models to predict, categorize, and conduct further inquiries.

Clarity produced by **cognitive ease** (e.g. when easy-to-read fonts increase rate of belief.)

**Danger signals:** use of well-worn cliches, Internet memes, deployment in areas where errors are more difficult to detect (morals, values, complex social or scientific phenomena?).

# OTHER FEATURES OF CLARITY

- 🧠 **Cognitive epiphany** (feeling new info fit into a coherent account)
- 🧠 **Cognitive facility** (feeling like you can make connections, generate explanations, labeling)

**Danger signals:** easy-to-apply framework that handles new evidence with ease, easy-to-apply categorizations, easy-to-generate explanations. (Ideally, explanations/categories that mask flaws in the framework.)

Manipulators can easily trigger “nutrient”-detection systems without allegiance to the truth. (Fat/salt/sugar taste good because signaled nutrient-dense foods, but now weaponized by companies unconcerned with nutrition.)

# EXTENDING THE SEDUCTION CONCERN:

“In a case of bottom-up technological seduction, Google suggests questions and then answers to those very questions, thereby closing the loop on the first stage of an iterative, path-dependent process of reasoning. If reasoning is the process of asking and answering questions, then the interaction between predictive and prescriptive analytics can largely bypass the individual’s own contribution to reasoning, supplying both a question *and* its answer.” (“Technological Seduction and Self-Radicalization,” Alfano, Carter and Cheong 2018, p. 309)

# Heersmink et al on trust, Transparency, and ILLUSION

Data transparency vs. algorithm transparency



(LLMs lack both)

# But they DO offer transparency-in-use



•Ihde's Human -technology - world Relations

•**Mediation Relations**

•*Embodiment*

•(Human-Technology) → World

•*Hermeneutics*

•Human → (Technology-World)

•**Alterity relation**

•Human → Technology(World)

•**Background relation**

•Technology → (Human/World)

# Heersmink et al caution:

“The phenomenology of LLMs makes it difficult for users to calibrate their trust correctly.” (p. 13)

Two cognitive traps:

- ☞ Anthropomorphism (plus value of testimony)
- ☞ Transparency-in-use

They warn: not enough to push responsibility onto users; need to address design concerns to avoid exploiting phenomenology.

(“A phenomenology and epistemology of large language models: transparency, trust, and trustworthiness”, Heersmink, de Rooij, Vázquez, and Colombo, 2024)

# TWO COUNTERSTRATEGIES FROM NGUYEN

“Intentionally and openly vague forms of communication are very important. They remind us that our thinking — our concepts, our inquiries, our understanding — is not yet finished.” (p. 250)

*and...*

“We now need to train ourselves to become suspicious of ideas and systems that go down just a little too sweetly — that are pleasurable and effortless and explain everything so wonderfully. Systems of thought that feel too clear should make us step up our investigative efforts instead of ending them. We need to learn to recognize, by feel, the seductions of clarity.” (p. 251)

“

*...metaphors and their kin wear their unfinishedness plainly on their faces. They are hard to use, and that difficulty reminds us that there is more work to be done.*

***They leave the basement door open, so we know there is more to explore down there. When clarity seduces, it can prevent us from pushing on, from finding and dwelling on our confusions. Seductive clarity presents us with a false floor for our investigations into the world.”***

*(Nguyen 2021, p. 250)*

# That open basement door...



This eerie metaphor of an open basement door is richer than Nyugen gives it credit for. How can eeriness contribute to good epistemic practices, working as both a caution and an invitation to investigate?

## A caution:

It's tempting to encourage people to cull their feeds, to screen out bad sources, to reject information that might be propaganda or click-bait, that might be AI-generated, to use our critical thinking skills to reject anything that smells suspicious.

# BUT THIS can BE a DANGEROUS STRATEGY

Doing so may undermine our capacities to:

- 🌱 Learn new or surprising things
- 🌱 Be challenged by ideas that contradict assumptions,
- 🌱 Hear from those with perspectives that differ from ours.

Nguyen himself highlights this elsewhere, discussing the dangers of echo chambers. Some trust is necessary in order for us to learn and grow in communities.

But the danger of bad information does not thereby go away. How are we to proceed?

# A STRATEGY FROM FOLKLORE?

Katya Ungerman argues that the online world is best understood through the lens of folklore.

Giving an alternative to the medicalized lens of “screen addiction,” she argues that the Internet’s tendency to draw us in, warp our perspectives, and distort our sense of time have very old parallels... but also advice for how to guard against them. As she puts it,

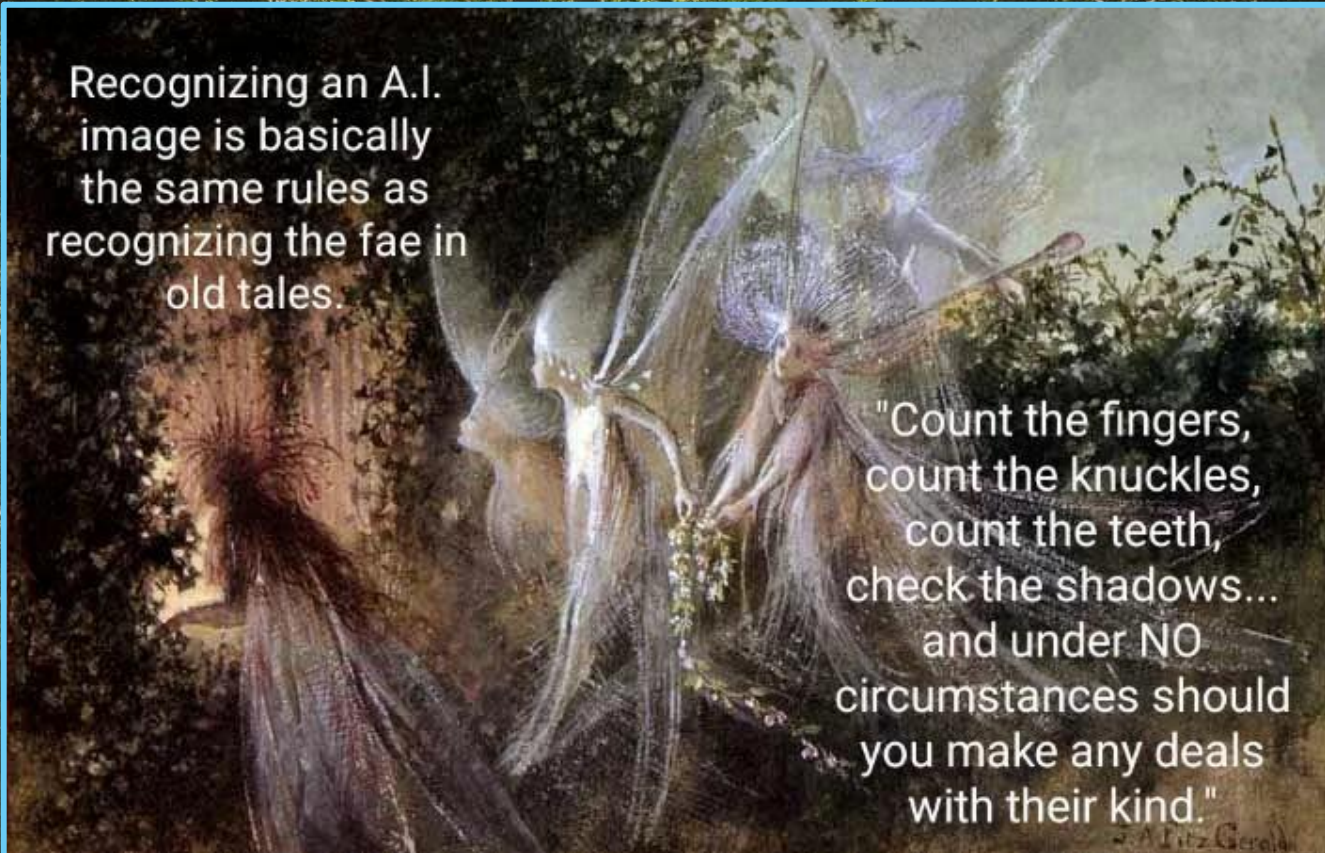
“Some of humanity's oldest stories are about crossings into otherworlds, places where ordinary rules dissolve, where time slips, where travelers risk forgetting who and what they are.”

A glowing blue deer with large antlers stands in a dark, misty forest. The scene is illuminated by soft, ethereal light, with several glowing blue spheres floating in the air. A large white circle is superimposed over the center of the image, containing a quote and its attribution. The deer is positioned to the left of the circle, looking towards the viewer.

“

*“Seeing the internet as a fairyland — an otherworld with its own logic — isn't about mystifying technology. It's about seeing it sharply, as the strange and powerful environment it really is. In this way, enchantment restores what habit has made invisible.”*

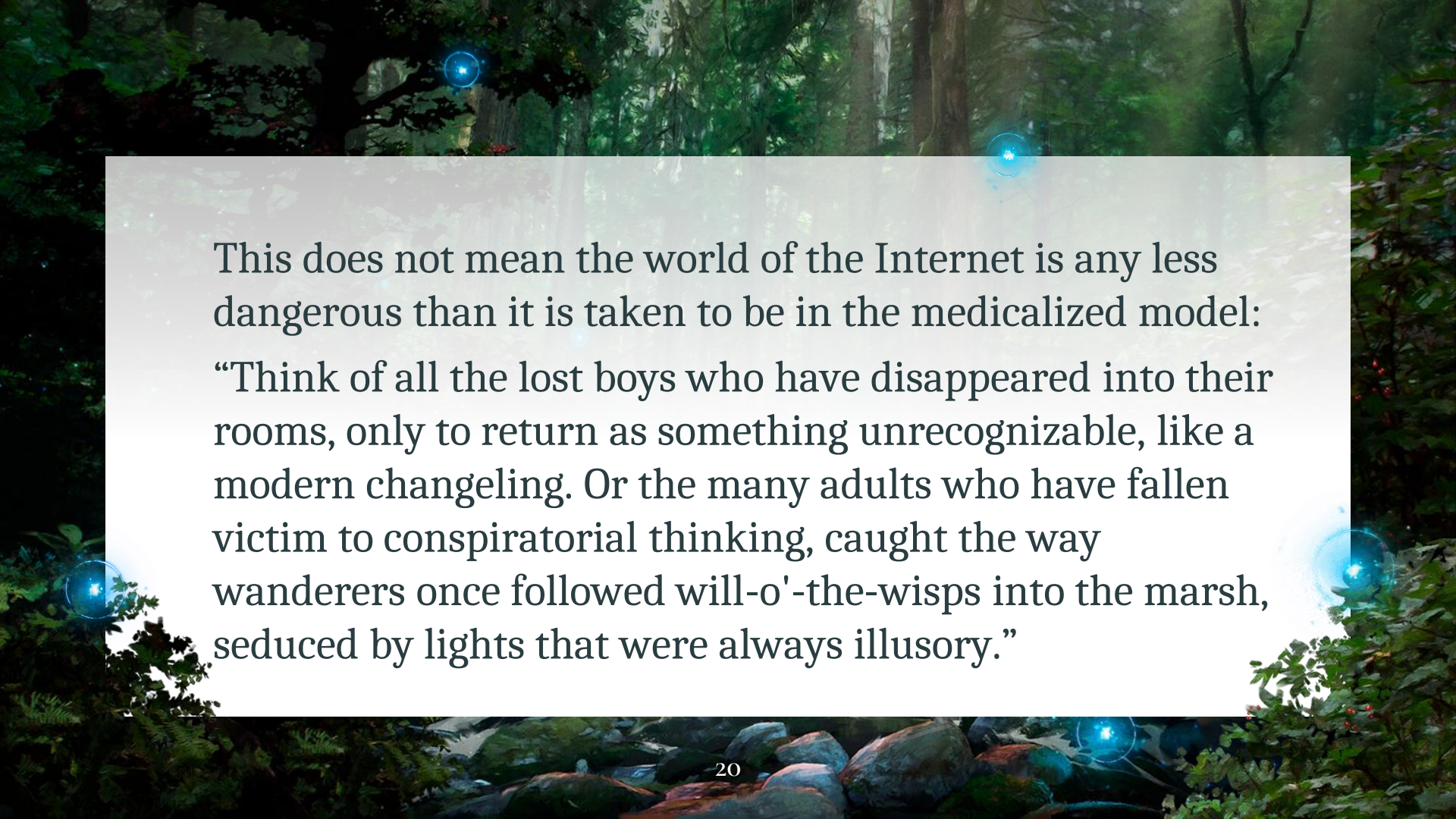
*(Ungerma 2025)*



Recognizing an A.I.  
image is basically  
the same rules as  
recognizing the fae in  
old tales.

"Count the fingers,  
count the knuckles,  
count the teeth,  
check the shadows...  
and under NO  
circumstances should  
you make any deals  
with their kind."

[https://www.reddit.com/r/WitchesVsPatriarchy/comments/1i3sxj1/dont\\_trust\\_the\\_fae\\_or\\_ai/](https://www.reddit.com/r/WitchesVsPatriarchy/comments/1i3sxj1/dont_trust_the_fae_or_ai/)



This does not mean the world of the Internet is any less dangerous than it is taken to be in the medicalized model: “Think of all the lost boys who have disappeared into their rooms, only to return as something unrecognizable, like a modern changeling. Or the many adults who have fallen victim to conspiratorial thinking, caught the way wanderers once followed will-o'-the-wisps into the marsh, seduced by lights that were always illusory.”

# What Ungerman adds is EERINESS

Eeriness does two things:

- ☞ it warns us that all is not as it might seem
- ☞ but also that we should investigate further...

sometimes you DO need to venture into the spooky basement or explore that uncanny sound in the woods, rather than ignore it and hope it goes away on its own.

Fairytales warn us but do not tell us not to venture into the dark forest. Instead, they give us guidance on how to proceed with care.

# AVOIDING THESE SPACES CARRIES ITS OWN DANGERS

In our current information ecosystem, it is easy to shut down, to let the flood of information (especially when liberally spiked with both mis- and disinformation) overwhelm us, or else to step up our defenses so aggressively that we fend off what we most need to find.

We need to avoid both embrace *and* avoidance. We need to cultivate cautious curiosity.

# Eeriness emphasizes ILLUSIONS

Fairytales tell us that the most fearsome things in the dark forest are not the wilderness itself, but the almost-human, the constructs and distorted mirrors and echoes and shadows that look like us have their own logic, and interests that do not align with ours, such that we cannot rest easy in our familiar habits of knowledge consumption.

# Some evocative PARALLELS

The lawyerly rules of the fae, with their interest in harvesting our identities in the form of our true names, to their elaborate and arcane guidelines for obligation and debt, to obscure goals and profit motives, may remind us of ...

...surveillance capitalism and the commodification of our personal data, like the way that soliciting odd details through playful quizzes and seemingly mundane interactions may be used to harvest our identity for trade with powerful but invisible entities.

Fairytale cautions about the gap between what we say and what we mean can mirror...

the fantastical misunderstandings produced by AI prompts and searches that too literally respond to the words we offer up.



And seductive business models that build networks of worshippers to offer up to advertisers and media empires ...

can give us a cozy sense of belonging while twisting our characters into something unrecognizable.



# Eeriness to counter seductiveness

Nguyen, Alfano et al, and Heersmink et al each reach for metaphors related to seduction to explore dangers of modern information technologies.

But we are also at risk of getting closed off in our own echo chambers, of failing to update our beliefs in light of new evidence.

Eeriness may be the right kind of double-edged sword to help us both exercise caution and explore strange spaces.

# REFERENCES

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A lush, misty forest scene with a rocky stream flowing through the center. The trees are tall and thin, with dense green foliage. Several glowing blue spheres with a bright light inside are scattered throughout the scene, some floating in the air and others resting on the rocks or ground. The overall atmosphere is magical and serene.

Thank you! Questions?

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