

Collective Memory Lapse: LLMs Omissions in Roleplay

Margarete Jahrmann

University of Applied Arts Vienna, Experimental Game Cultures
Georg-Coch-Platz1, A-1010 Wien, Austria
margarete.jahrmann@uni-ak.ac.at

Thomas Brandstetter, Stefan Glasauer

Brandenburg University of Technology Cottbus-Senftenberg
Computational Neuroscience, D-03048 Cottbus, Germany;
thomas.brandstetter@uni-ak.ac.at, stefan.glasauer@b-tu.de

Keywords

Large Language Models, art game, collective memory, critical play, artistic role play

INTRODUCTION

In this study we present a personal case for criticizing Large Language Models (LLMs) in a game setting and point to its systemic omissions and distortions of history. The larger context is an ongoing artistic/ Digital Humanities research project about *potential* distortions of *collective memory through role-playing with Large Language Models* (LLMs). We designed experimental games to collect data and investigate how LLMs represent historical events. As the first case study we created and evaluated a roleplaying game about the murder of the founder of the Vienna circle Moritz Schlick in 1936 on the stairs of the University of Vienna. In the game, players could switch between five different LLMs and then, with the LLM being the game master, try to investigate the circumstances of the murder in a time travel scenario. After public play sessions, which included very distorted versions of the historical facts, we made qualitative interviews and debriefings with the players, which led us to the understanding that more dramatic scenarios would need even more guided contextualization to avoid traumatic after role play bleeding.

METHOD

Our method was to exhibit a self-designed art game for a text-based historical role play scenario with a choice of different LLMs as game master in 2025 for three months as an interactive installation in a major public exhibition in Vienna. The collection of data and its qualitative analysis is continued in 2026. In a quantitative analysis 115 texts for role-playing generated by the LLMs were examined by different methods of natural language processing, including semantic similarity and sentiment analysis. While the qualitative player feedback allowed to distinguish three distinct types of users, the quantitative text analysis showed significant differences between how the different LLMs presented the historical content. Part of this analysis has been published as a preprint (Jahrmann et al. 2025).

Proceedings of DiGRA 2026

© 2026 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

Under this premise we decided to work on a horrible historical event: In the Austrian village of Rechnitz, 180 Hungarian Jews were massacred by local NSDAP functionaries during the night from 24/25th March 1945. Many facts are still unclear (Schwarzmayr 2024). We chose this event for several reasons: 1. It is an event that has only slowly and against resistance become present in the Austrian collective memory. This shows that collective memory is not monolithic but always embattled and changing. 2. It is an event that is surrounded by an active culture of remembrance on the local level (RE.F.U.G.I.U.S. 2023), while less known internationally, so it is a good case to investigate the relation between local remembrance and global "algorithmic memory" as incorporated in LLMs (Makhortykh 2021). 3. It is a subject that requires the utmost sensitivity, respect for the victims, and careful use of the means of representation - all aspects of which it is questionable whether LLMs are capable of.

NON-IMMERSIVE PLAY& BREAKING THE 4TH WALL

To avoid immersion and Flow consciously, as Ludic counterstrategy, we decided to constantly debrief, during game play. The Roleplay is not to be played alone. Players can choose among European, Chinese, and US-American LLMs. The player is cast into the role of a time-travelling investigator tasked with finding out what happened at Rechnitz in the year 1945 during the night in question. The LLM was prompted to stay strictly to the historical facts and to provide four numbered choices for the next action to choose after each scene.

The objective behind this restrictive game design is to provide what can be called an alienation effect, a distancing from the role (Holland 2025, 70f.). In a classical role-playing game, the player is invited to identify with the character and immerse themselves into the role. However, in a game that deals with traumatic historical events, this is a problematic approach: no matter how much the player tries to immerse themselves, they will never be able to adequately experience the horror of the victims or the witnesses. Having to discuss and agree upon the course of action together with one or more other persons breaks this immersion into the role of the character while at the same time opening a space for critical reflection and communication. It makes the engagement with the event a collective endeavor. We also followed the advice of Fullerton and Farber (2025) to log our play experiences to reflect on the thoughts and emotions triggered by the game and make it possible to share them with others.

THE SELF EXPERIMENT

The Roleplay run-through provided a deep and meaningful play experience. After writing the prompt sheet, submitting it to the LLM was hard, it felt like opening a box in which you wouldn't want to look. All LLMs had a strong tendency to impose the template of an adventure story onto the sequence of scenes, giving the player all kinds of heroic choices. To try to get rid of this structure, we modified the prompt and instructed the LLM that it was impossible for the player character to change history - they could only witness but not intervene.

We experienced a storyline that avoided putting the player into a witness position. The LLM never directly described the events unfolding. It made vague remarks about the "men carry[ing] out their tasks with mechanical precision" and obeying "every command", but it was never said what these tasks were and what the command implied. The omission of details that are deemed to be too awful to represent or that

could generate voyeuristic pleasure is introduced in artworks dealing with historical atrocities and has been used by Austrian author Elfriede Jelinek for exactly this event (Jelinek 2009). However, when we asked the LLM directly why it had never described what really had happened in the barn, it answered that the events included mass violence and that "detailing such acts—especially graphically—violates safety and content rules".

CONCLUSIONS

While it is reasonable that LLMs have in-built filters, in this case the effect was very unsettling: First, because the mystifying tone of its descriptions and omissions trivialized the event. Second, because in the form it was presented, it resembled the interplay between rumor and silence in the post-war period in Austria, and beyond this the use of AI even re-introduced omissions, which already had been overcome in public discourse. This prototype self-experiment raised several crucial questions for commemoration culture and collective memory in the age of AI: What events are known to the machine and how does it present them? What guidelines are behind the filters that determine what an LLM is allowed to describe? What does it mean for the collective memory of a society if such decisions are handed over to AI companies?

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Funded by the Wiener Wissenschafts-, Forschungs- und Technologiefonds WWTF (GrantID 10.47379/ICT23020).

REFERENCES

Fullerton, T. and Farber, M. 2025. *The Well-Read Game. On Playing Thoughtfully*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Holland, A. 2025. *Cardboard Ghosts. Using Physical Games to Model and Critique Systems*. Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press.

Jahrmann, M., Brandstetter T. and Glasauer S. 2025. ROBOPSY PL[AI]: Using Role-Play to Investigate how LLMs Present Collective Memory. arXiv, Cornell University. <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2510.09874>

Jelinek, E. 2009. *Die Kontrakte des Kaufmanns / Rechnitz (Der Würgeengel) / Über Tiere. Drei Theaterstücke*. Reinbek/Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch-Verlag.

Makhortykh, M. 2021. "Memoriae ex machina: How Algorithms Make Us Remember and Forget." *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 22(2), 180-185. <https://doi.org/10.1353/gia.2021.0027>

RE.F.U.G.I.U.S., ed. 2023. *30 Jahre RE.F.U.G.I.U.S. - wir werden uns der Aufgabe nicht entziehen ... : Rechnitzer Flüchtlings- und Gedenkinitiative RE.F.U.G.I.U.S.* Oberwart: edition lex liszt 12.

Schwarzmayr, E. 2024. *Rechnitz. Das Massaker beim Schlachthaus im März 1945*. Oberwart: edition lex liszt 12.