

Airport photos

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1 Story

1.1 The Country Without Cameras

This story takes place in an airport in a particular country. Since it takes place in the distant future, the name of the country is not relevant. Increasing resource scarcity due to climate decline, coupled with a shift towards totalitarianism and a zealous belief in technology's ability to solve social problems, has led this particular country to invest billions into developing AI-powered solutions to be more efficient and resourceful. Some government-funded initiatives aimed to maximize efficiency in using resources and building infrastructure. Others, like the National Security and Cultural Control Act (NSCCA), focused on solidifying the government's power and control over the population by controlling the process of making images. All non-governmental cameras and recording devices were confiscated, and their materials were recycled for other initiatives. Moreover, a new system was implemented to be the country's only source of visual images: MemoreVisium (MeVi or MV for short).

Before the ratification of the NSCCA, MemoreVisium was a Generative AI model designed by governmental agencies to ensure "a consistent and truthful visual identity for our nation." Government employees had been deployed around the clock to make images and videos in every part of the country for an extended period, ensuring the model had examples of the beauty and splendor of the country. MV was then used to generate promotional videos, posters, and social media posts with great effect. Its outstanding realistic quality and consistency lent power to the NSCCA, making it the country's official and only source of visual images. As a result of the NSCCA, everything from textbooks to children's books to advertisements at bus stops is made using one of the MV terminals. At these terminals, individuals can describe the visual they want, and the machine creates an A5-sized image printout.

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1.2 Airport photos

I arrived at the airport a few hours ago. My flight's not for another four hours, but I always get anxious on the days I fly. It probably stems from when I almost lost my flight in the new year when I didn't pay attention to the airport code and asked my parents to drop me off at an airport an hour away from home instead of the one 30 minutes away. I'd never seen my dad drive so fast on the highway from the wrong airport to the correct one to check in my bags.

The fear of missing my flight aside, I wanted to check some of the MemoremVisium machines at the airport. I'd seen them in the cities I visited but was too shy to try them out. The ones at the airport were my last chance.

With my bags in tow, I approached the nearest MV machine. It resembled an arcade console stripped of color. The game controllers had been replaced with an industrial keyboard and mouse ball, and the outside had been lined with big stickers of the airport code and a marketing slogan, "Enhancing every Frame."

At the machine, I began describing one of the highlights of my trip:

"I visited this famous restaurant that had been open for 50 years and had become a central part of the community. The building was on the street corner with a small parking lot that I never saw empty. The building had never been remodeled and had the original decorations. It reminded me of what Las Vegas could look like when it was built: bright and flashy with a sense of grandeur. Compared to the other shops and houses in the area, it was like a pearl. Inside, it looked like a diner from the 1950s or 1960s America with checker-patterned floors and clean surfaces. There were marble columns throughout the interior and big mirrors on most walls. It felt like being at church. All the waiters, regardless of gender or race, wore black trousers with white button-downs and a black tie and vest. They all had the same dark green aprons. It felt like I'd been transported back in time. The food they brought out looked delicious on big silver trays. Each plate was colorful, and the portions were so generous..."

Happy with my text, I submitted and paid for a print. After waiting, I got my print, which I could best describe as disappointing.



A retro-style diner sits on a street corner with a small parking lot, its bright lights reflecting off the checkered floors and marble columns inside. Waiters in matching uniforms carry silver trays with neatly arranged plates of food while large mirrors line the walls.

The colors were duller than I remembered, and the food looked nothing like I'd described. Many of the things I mentioned were represented in the visual, but it lacked the tone of how I felt when I'd seen them. Dissatisfied, I spent

most of the time until my check-in, tweaking my description to make an image that best represented my experience. With my many failures stuffed into my bag, I went to check in for my flight.

2 Reflection

This story is a draft and a start for new work following a recent interview study [2]. With storytelling, I wanted to explore a tension we identified between the realism of AI-generated images and their ability to convey lived experiences. In our interviews, photographers valued AI as a tool for self-expression, particularly in enabling people to share their experiences while remaining anonymous. However, they also raised concerns about its lack of depth, emotional authenticity, and representational accuracy — important qualities for conveying lived experiences. This highlights a broader challenge of representational agency: how AI systems shape what is visually depicted and whose perspectives and emotions are meaningfully reflected in those depictions.

Speculative methodology, particularly storytelling, is well suited for exploring representational agency because it allows us to envision and critique possible systems without being constrained by the technical complexities of building and testing AI models. While there is value in prototyping and addressing technical challenges, speculative approaches provide a way to probe AI’s societal and experiential implications before these systems are fully realized. Several projects [1, 3, 4] demonstrate how AI-generated images can hold deep meaning for users, shaping how they construct memory and identity. By focusing on storytelling, I wanted to dive into this meaning making and where it might break down or be created

In this story, the central system, MemoremVisium (MV), has been trained extensively as a tool for state-controlled visual propaganda. In a world without cameras, people can no longer create personal images, only those generated through MV, raising questions about individual agency in visual representation. Initially, I focused on how a visitor to this country might experience frustration when using MV to document their trip—AI-generated images capturing elements of reality but failing to reflect personal sentiment and highlighting the system creator’s sentiment.

Coming from an outside perspective the inability to create images of one’s own lived experiences is a distressing experience where your past has been blanketed. However, another possible direction for this story is to shift away from the visitor’s perspective and consider how children who have never used cameras might engage with MemoreVisium. This alternative perspective is one I’d like to further explore to further engage with the value of AI-generated images. In my mind, the machine functions like a photo booth, where kids gather with props and stickers to create playful, collaborative images. I imagine two best friends describing themselves as “two cartoon foxes playing soccer in the exact park we always go to—one in a grey bucket hat, the other in a blue baseball cap.” Rather than seeking photorealism, the children embrace a more abstract, cartoony representation that aligns with how they feel and experience the world. This version of MemoremVisium highlights an alternative potential for generative AI—not as a tool for erasing individual perspectives but as a medium for personal and collective imagination.

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