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# AI Powder

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## Abstract

An emergency room physician's world is upended when she encounters a mysterious new substance: AI Powder. A shadowy tech start-up encourages her to "just sprinkle some AI on it," but as she navigates a series of interactions with patients, colleagues, and loved ones, she begins to uncover the unsettling truth about what is truly at stake.

## Keywords

AI, speculative fiction, design fiction, future of work

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# AI Powder

Dr. Ringo took a long, leisurely lunch break. As she sipped her midnight coffee and leaned back in the plastic cafeteria chair, she tried to remember the last time she had actually *sipped* her mid-shift coffee, rather than just swallowing it in rapid, hurried gulps that burned her tongue and throat. Surely not since starting her position in the Emergency Room at Horizon Memorial Hospital.

Wasn't it just a few hours ago that she learned about the bus crash on the evening news? A speeding bus had careened off the road when its driver swerved to avoid hitting a stalled semi-truck. The bus flipped over as it tumbled into the steep ditch on the side of the road. Crushed metal, broken glass, and tens of injured bodies lay piled together on what used to be the ceiling of the upside-down bus. Dr. Ringo had rushed to work early in an attempt to beat the ambulances and the paramedics there. And yet, even an hour after the bus had crashed, she was ordering CT scans for stomach pains, sewing together minor wounds inflicted by ambitious kitchen knives, and draining Toradol into migraine patients—everyday ER tasks that she could do in her sleep. In fact, she had seen fewer patients than on an ordinary night in the ER—thus, the lunch break. Horizon Memorial Hospital was the only ER within sixty miles. So where did all those bus crash victims end up?

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"I apologize for coming into the ER for this," said the patient, "but, you know, I've heard that things have been pretty slow around here lately, and I couldn't sleep anyway…" ER traffic still had not picked up since the night of the bus crash the week before, and with every slow sip of coffee, Dr. Ringo got more and more antsy; something was off.

"No problem," said Dr. Ringo. She was, truthfully, just happy to have a patient at all, especially someone with what appeared to be, from a quick glance at his chart, quite an intriguing condition. "I'm happy to help. So, tell me what's going on?"

"Well," said Amir, "every Sunday, I go over to my parents' for dinner. My twin brother and my sister are usually there also. I don't know why I didn't notice this until we were all at the dinner table, but I was looking down at my right arm, and then my brother's arm next to me, and I swear to God mine was noticeably several shades lighter than his!

"My brother and I, we have always looked identical. Same with everyone in the family; we all have the same color of skin, this rich dark brown color. I can even show you pictures if you don't believe me. But now, I look different than all of

them. It almost reminds me of one of those filters, like on Instagram? Where they always change the shading to lighten your skin.

"I don't think my family noticed," he continued, "but I about jumped out of my chair when I saw the difference between my arm and my brother's. I excused myself from the table, and I ran into the bathroom to stare at myself in the mirror. Now, this is the same mirror that I always saw myself in as a kid growing up, the same light fixtures and everything. I mean, like every teenage kid, I had a phase where I obsessed over my looks. I spent many hours staring at myself in that mirror, sometimes hating my skin color because it made me so different from all the white kids at school. Then later, growing to love it. But on Sunday, looking into that familiar mirror, I was certain that I really was several shades lighter than I used to be."

Dr. Ringo listened intently, racking her brain for medical conditions that could have caused such a change. "Anyone in your family with vitiligo? Have you been using any new lotions, new skin cleansers, anything like that?"

"No way," said Amir. "I never mess around with skin lotions or that kind of stuff. I'm very particular about what I put on my skin. The only thing I can think of is…" He trailed off, looking puzzled. "Well, like I said, I'm very particular about what touches my skin. And the only thing that got on my skin lately that I could not check the ingredients list of, that I honestly have no idea what it's made out of, was this…well, I guess it was a powder."

"A powder?" Dr. Ringo asked.

Amir continued. "Did you hear about that bus crash last week? The one on Neon Verge Blvd.?" Dr. Ringo nodded. "Well, I was on that bus. I was sitting in a window seat about halfway back, on my way home from work, and then suddenly I wasn't sitting there anymore. The bus was upside-down, my head was bloody, and I was in a lot of pain."

Dr. Ringo's excited buzz mixed with skepticism as she asked her follow-up questions. Curiously, Amir's health appeared to be impeccable—no visible scars, no signs of head trauma, no marks of any sort of injury. "And which hospital treated you that night?"

"No hospital! It was the strangest thing. Have you heard of VitalSynth Industries, the new AI start-up? They arrived at the scene of the bus crash almost immediately, in a van that seemed to be like a mobile urgent care or something. At first, I thought, how could they possibly treat all of us in one van? Are they even doctors? I had never seen the logo or heard the name. But before I could think too

much about it, a man in a white lab coat wrenched open the bus window and started sprinkling a powder onto us. Pretty soon I was covered with this sparkly




Figure 1. "Just sprinkle some AI on it!"
Credit: David Haimson

powder, and it was seeping into my skin, and I started to feel, physically, well, really pretty great! Like, I could tell that I had been hurt, but I had also been healed, like to an excessive extent. My head, which had been bleeding and throbbing with pain, was suddenly just…not. I had had this back pain, too, that I had been dealing with for a few weeks before the accident, and that was just…fixed! I had absolutely no bruises, no aches, no pains. Just healed. I wasn't sure if I was hallucinating because of the pain or what. But I got up and walked right out the door of the bus, and so did everyone else! In fact, the door of the bus had been crushed, and they fixed that with the powder, too."

Dr. Ringo stared at Amir in disbelief. A powder? How could a powder possibly heal a busload of injuries? How could it fix a demolished bus? She thought back to her classes in med school, to all of the medical journal papers she had read. She recalled nothing about a healing powder.

"I never trusted tech companies and new health gimmicks. And so I guess it's no surprise that they would've messed with my skin tone like this. But doctor, what was that stuff? Am I going to be okay? Can you give me something to get my skin back to the color of the rest of my family? Are there procedures for this kind of thing? Some kind of antidote powder? I feel like I'm not *me* anymore, and I'm so worried my family is going to notice it too."

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Dr. Ringo's favorite TV show was interrupted by a commercial break. "Just sprinkle some AI on it!" the voice said with an upbeat lilt, confident and emphatic. Dr. Ringo's eyes were drawn to the large hand at the top of the screen, sprinkling a handful of sparkly dust down onto whatever mysterious item existed below the screen's cutoff. "Wow!!" said a group of onlookers, some out loud, some with their eyes full of awe and their mouths hanging open. With that, after encouraging the viewer to visit VitalSynth's website to arrange their own delivery of AI Powder, the brief commercial was over. Dr. Ringo stared at the TV in cynical astonishment.

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"We didn't really know what we were going to get, but this was all that we had hoped for! Well, for the most part," Dr. Ringo's sister Melissa said on the video chat.

She switched from the front-facing camera to the rear-facing camera so that Dr. Ringo could see the new kitchen. "Here's our new 'smart' fridge; it knows what we're running low on and automatically orders it from the grocery store. And here's

our AI-infused oven, which starts preheating on its own when I decide on a recipe, and even knows when the casserole is finished cooking. Oh, and you know I've been trying to lose weight…so if I'm planning on cooking something super high-calorie, the stove (or the fridge—they work together) will be like, 'Hey, let me suggest this other recipe that tastes almost the same but with way fewer calories!'"

"Wait a sec—if your goal was to lose weight, why not just sprinkle the powder on yourself? Wouldn't it transform you to your ideal weight immediately?" Dr. Ringo asked.

"Oh, well, they only sent me a little bit of it. Just one packet. So I couldn't fix everything in my life! And the kitchen had been bugging me for years—it was so old-fashioned! I kept eating junk because I felt like the kitchen setup made it impossible to cook healthy meals."

Dr. Ringo remembered Melissa's old kitchen well, and it definitely was not smart. After all, this was the kitchen in the house they had both grown up in. The wooden cabinets and the aging appliances had not been updated since their parents had moved in in the late '70s. Now, over the video call, she could see the sleek quartz counters, the minimalist white cabinets (you could just tell that they would close automatically if you left them open too long), the stainless-steel appliances and high-end modern fixtures. It looked nice, she had to admit. Dr. Ringo hated cooking, and her sister's kitchen looked like it could sense and compensate for something like that. "Didn't it feel weird, sprinkling a mysterious powder that you bought online all over mom and dad's old kitchen?"

"Oh, I didn't *buy* it!" Melissa's face lit up, the way it often did when she felt like she had gotten a really good deal. "They sent it for free! I got an ad for it in the mail. All we had to do was agree to have these cameras installed." She panned the phone over to the top corner of the room where the wall met the ceiling. It almost blended in with the white paint, but Dr. Ringo could see the eye of a tiny camera peering into the kitchen. It looked back at her with a blank expression. She felt herself becoming a fragment of data. She had taken enough computer science classes in undergrad to know that each pixel of her face was traveling back to a data center somewhere, to be fed into the training set for an algorithm that informed the mighty powder.

"Melissa!! Please tell me that's the only camera…"

"What!? They promised us that no *person* is going to see any of this. *Especially* the one in our bedroom. The cameras are just here to help them to make the powder even better! And I mean, look at this kitchen! And I feel better, and I'm almost ten pounds down."

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There was something strange going on with Dr. Putnam's patients. Putnam was a trauma surgeon. He preferred to work at night, and he often operated on ER patients who needed complex procedures. Dr. Ringo noticed that Dr. Putnam's patients' average recovery time was down to less than an hour. Even after complex surgeries like a clamshell thoracotomy or an emergency exploratory laparotomy after a gunshot wound, for which patients typically stay in the hospital for at the very least a few days for recovery and observation, Dr. Putnam's patients were waltzing out of the OR on their own two feet, with no visible bandages and seemingly in no pain. His OR times didn't match up—a hip fracture surgery finished in thirty minutes? An emergency splenectomy on a car accident victim with only a skeleton crew of Dr. Putnam and an anesthesiologist? Though he tried to conceal it under the sleeve of his medical coat, in the elevator Dr. Ringo noticed what seemed to be a biometric tracker of some sort on his right arm, with the "ynth" of the VitalSynth logo just barely visible.

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The next day at work, Dr. Ringo overheard Dr. Sanchez, her boss and the hospital's medical director, in a heated meeting with a young techie-looking man who, from his visitor pass and the logo on his sweatshirt, appeared to be a rep from VitalSynth Industries. "Absolutely not!" said Dr. Sanchez loudly, an appalled look on her face. "That's where we draw the line. We will never release our patients' data to an outside company!"

"But just think of how much we could help your patients if we worked together!" the rep insisted, undeterred. "Imagine how much we could support your doctors—no more burnout, no more endless shifts. They could actually spend quality time with their families. We're already saving countless lives every day in our mobile urgent care clinic. Imagine the impact if we integrated AI Powder into Horizon Memorial Hospital! You're a leading hospital, Dr. Sanchez. Once you make the leap, others will follow. This isn't just innovation—it's a revolution! Think of the massive impact we could have on public health!"

Dr. Sanchez's skeptical, confounded expression remained unchanged.

"And as I'm sure you've noticed, Dr. Putnam has already had such excellent results with it!" the rep added, as a last desperate attempt to convince the medical director.

Something shifted, but it was not Dr. Sanchez's principles. "Putnam!!!" she yelled, marching off toward the surgeon's office.

There stood Putnam, calm and unbothered, joking around with a healthy and laughing patient who had, just an hour prior, been barely conscious after sustaining multiple stab wounds.

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Dr. Ringo stopped by the counter where the receptionist, Tabitha, sat. She considered Tabitha a "work friend"—they often chatted during slow times at the hospital, which had become increasingly frequent. Tabitha's job was to field all of the questions from patients' families and loved ones. *When* could they see their sister? *How* was she doing? Are you *sure* these doctors know what they are doing? It was, frankly, exhausting, especially towards the end of a long shift.

"I know I'm not the best at customer service," Tabitha told Dr. Ringo. "It just doesn't come naturally to me. I understand these people's questions and frustrations, but for some reason I can never seem to respond to them in a way that helps. I always seem to just frustrate them more. You know how I have a 'resting bitchface'—people always think I'm mad when I'm not."

As if on cue, an agitated young man walked up to the counter. His hands were visibly shaking. "What's going on with my mom?" he demanded. "You told me the doctors would update me!"

"Let me check for you," Tabitha said in a flat voice and even tone. She typed the man's mother's name into her computer system. "Oh, room 336. I see that we're still waiting for her to wake up after her procedure. Once the anesthesia wears off, someone will bring you back to see her."

The man looked even more frustrated. His voice wavered, "Don't you even care? How can you be so calm and detached about something like this? I don't even know if she's going to be okay or not!!" He stormed off.

Something on the computer flashed in red.

"Hey, it's okay." Dr. Ringo responded to Tabitha. "I know you—I know you're a caring person, even if they can't see it. You do an amazing job keeping track of everything: who needs what, who's connected to which patient."

"Sure, I'm great at remembering things like that. I almost never make mistakes. It's just that with the new system…"

"What new system?"

"We have this new system on our computers—all of the patient-facing staff have it now, except for the MDs and RNs. It uses a little camera to track our facial expressions, and a microphone to monitor what we say and our tone. Then it decides whether we are conveying the right emotions. Like it told me just now that I should be smiling more and acting more reassuring! What does that even mean?"

Dr. Ringo leaned over the counter, craning her neck around so she could see the computer screen. A window in the screen's corner displayed a series of metrics in different colors, and a red pop-up flashed a directive in bold letters: "Smile more! Reassure the customer!" She could see the little camera above the screen looking back at her, now searching her face for emotion, analyzing.

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A week later, Tabitha greeted Dr. Ringo with a wide, toothy smile. "Hey there!" she said, never breaking her smile, "How are you today, my friend?"

"What's going on, Tabitha? What is this?" The receptionist's affect seemed so out of character, cheery and animated in a way that she'd never seen from Tabitha before.

"I know, it's so strange, isn't it? But I had to…The system, the one that tracks my emotions, it flagged to my manager that I needed to make some big changes, that I would not be able to keep my job unless I improved at customer service. And then I saw one of those commercials, you know, 'just sprinkle some AI on it'?" And I realized, okay, well I've seen what this powder can do to patients. I know what Dr. Putnam has been up to. So, if it can heal people's physical problems, then couldn't it cure my autism too?"

Dr. Ringo felt her stomach turn. This new "Tabitha" seemed so different, so cheery. She didn't know what to say.

"And ever since, my metrics have been great, almost 100 per cent! It never has to tell me to smile more," Tabitha said with a smile.

"What about after work?" Dr. Ringo imagined Tabitha sitting on her couch, at home, alone, the light of the television shining towards her and her microwave dinner, smiling into the empty, dark room.

"That's the problem…I can't turn it off! I used to be able to relax at home, not worry about interacting with patients and their families, not worry about people at all. Now, I have this same upbeat *demeanor* even when I'm at home alone. It's like I'm smiling to myself, waiting to cheerily greet an army of hospital visitors who never arrive. I miss my old self…"

Dr. Ringo missed her too.

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After work, the commercial came on again. "Do you want to be stronger? More attractive? A better person overall?" the voice asked Dr. Ringo, interrupting as she tried to click into a news story about the precarious future of the traditional healthcare industry.

"Just sprinkle some AI on it!" the voice urged.

She felt obsolete, antiquated. She was a switchboard operator at the advent of automated telephone systems, a typesetter at the dawn of digital printing.

She started to think about what *she* might want, or need, to "sprinkle some AI on." Part of her felt compelled to scatter it wildly, throw it around randomly, toss it into the air and let it land where it pleased.

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"How much do you think this is going to cost?" asked Jim, looking up at Dr. Ringo from the hospital bed. He was sweating all over, and looked exhausted and uncomfortable. From his chart, she learned that he was complaining of pain in the abdomen and was suffering from shortness of breath. She could tell that the right side of his abdomen was extremely swollen, even under the hospital sheet, since it was such a contrast from his otherwise emaciated state. When she viewed the CT scan results, her jaw dropped. Jim had something she had learned about in medical school, but had not yet encountered: a hydatid cyst. A tapeworm had created the cyst in his abdomen, and it was still lurking under his skin somewhere. He needed a delicate resection of the cyst (taking care not to burst it) and anti-parasitic medication immediately.

"I can't estimate the cost, unfortunately, but I need to warn you that this cannot be left untreated. We really need to excise your cyst right away."

"I don't have insurance, though! I'll be in debt for the rest of my life if I stay in the hospital. I shouldn't even be here now. I just couldn't take the chances that they gave me at the VitalSynth urgent care van." He struggled to speak, to get all the words out between pained breaths.

"What do you mean, 'chances'?"

"With the AI Powder. They said that their predictive models were giving a 60 percent chance that the powder would work on *me* and kill the parasite. But there was also a 40 percent chance that the powder would work on the *parasite* instead, and it would grow even stronger and take over my body completely. Especially since, as they said, my cyst is full of parasite larvae, it's possible that the powder could work on each of *them*, which would obviously be a disaster for me." Dr. Ringo could see the terror on Jim's face.

"Well, I can give you a 100 percent chance that we will prioritize *your* health! Let's get you to the operating room and take care of this." Jim looked relieved, but Dr. Ringo could tell that he couldn't ignore the reality that while his body may be safe at Horizon Memorial, his bank account would not be.

Later at home, lying awake, Dr. Ringo's mind teemed with unsettling thoughts of AI-enhanced parasites. In particular, she was troubled by the powder's potential effect on the parasite larvae. Releasing thousands of AI-enhanced tapeworm larvae into his body would clearly be harmful to Jim. But what if they escaped into the environment? And what if the AI enhancements were part of the enhanced tapeworms' genotype, and all their offspring would also be enhanced?

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It was only a matter of time, she knew, until the powder was sprinkled onto the wrong thing—or, the wrong creature. "Just sprinkle some AI on it!"—the slogan played in her head on repeat. But what "it" was really mattered, and so did what happened to "it," as in the case involving the parasite. Everyone loved the powder's ability to make things "better." But the meaning of "better" was often unclear, as she had seen with Amir, Tabitha, and Jim. Dr. Ringo had heard rumors of giant muscular rats in the New York subways, disastrously large, armored scorpions out in the Arizona desert. She'd seen the TikToks and the reels documenting content creators' experiments with learning what "better" meant for small creatures.

Part of her wanted to see what the powder did to her own body. Could it detect her own unique desires, even when she was so unsure of them herself? Or would it

deduce typical human wants: beauty, intelligence, dominance, happiness? Or perhaps it would make a prediction based on her demographics and what it had learned about her preferences. The other part of Dr. Ringo, the more destructive part that was increasingly drawn to chaos in a world she no longer understood, wanted to see what it did to the creatures—worms, ants, earwigs—in her backyard. What were their desires? What did "better" mean to them? Even with chaotic results, the consequences seemed reversible: If the creatures became troublesome, wreaking harm on humans and infrastructure, any harm they caused could be fixed with AI Powder. What's the worst that could happen? Just sprinkle some AI on it!

At the hospital, the VitalSynth reps were always giving out free samples. Pharmaceutical reps from other companies typically gave out name-brand pills meant for physicians to distribute to patients. AI Powder was more scarce—it now had enough hype on its own, and VitalSynth had little need for marketing—but many hospitals like Horizon Memorial were still resistant. The ethics of sharing patient data were just too thorny. So the VitalSynth reps came around, bringing donuts and coffee for the nurses and receptionists, taking the doctors out for lunch, and, of course, distributing small packets of AI Powder as free samples. "Just try it!" they said. "You don't have to use it if you don't like it!" Dr. Ringo saved most of them for potential patient emergencies, but she stowed one away in her pocketbook.



Figure 2. Worm
Credit: David Haimson

And now she stood in her backyard, feeling the soft gusts of wind blowing by in the late afternoon, holding a mound of powder in each hand. She couldn't see the

insects and the worms, but she knew they were there in the grass and just below. She rushed her indecision head-on by throwing her hands in the air wildly, letting the wind pick up the powder and spread it around, watching sparkly specks drift down to the earth. It had rained earlier, and earthworms had surfaced, some venturing onto the small concrete path leading to Dr. Ringo's back door. A worm poked its small, slimy head out of the grass just as the sparkly grains of powder settled to the ground.

## Authors' Statement

It all started with a dream. In November 2024, Oliver woke up from a vivid dream about *AI Powder*. The concept was simple: a magical powder that could be sprinkled on just about anything to "improve" it. The day after, he shared the dream with Nazanin, noting that he was planning to post about it on social media. Nazanin suggested that they collaboratively write a speculative fiction about it instead—and here we are.

In what follows, we first describe how fiction can be an important tool to understand technology's impact and imagine otherwise. Then, using the AI Powder metaphor, we discuss how techno-solutionist, techno-determinist, and techno-somnambulist approaches to innovation, especially when implemented without meaningful consent, can generate harmful outcomes, particularly for marginalized individuals. We show how AI Powder impacts people's experiences and meaning-making. We next situate AI (and its framing as inevitable) within its broader context, and conclude with possibilities for escaping AI Powder by imagining a different metaphor: *clay*.

## Fiction as a Tool to Imagine Sociotechnical Alternatives

Fiction can be used as a powerful tool to interrogate technology's role in society. Design fiction, in particular, is a way to understand our world by interrogating and creating, through writing, possible alternative worlds (Grand and Wiedmer 2010; Harrington et al. 2022; Markussen and Knutz 2013). That is, by writing an alternate reality into being, we can highlight the gap between our current reality and the fictional one, and this gap opens up important discussions about technology's role in society and how we might wish it to be different (Dunne and Raby 2013). Design fictions can have different epistemological orientations (Baumer et al. 2020); ours takes a critical and speculative approach to an existing technology.

Following Lucy Suchman's (2023) proposition to question AI's status as a stable entity, we use fiction to take AI's proliferation and inevitability to an absurd level by imagining it as a powder that can be sprinkled anywhere and everywhere. Fiction allows us to anticipate potential AI harms, rather than just shrugging our shoulders and saying they were "unintended consequences" (Parvin and Pollock 2020). With

fiction that speculates on harms, we can resist uncritical deployment of technologies whose implications have been under-considered, by explicitly considering those potentials and their possible mitigation (Parvin and Pollock 2020).

We build from a long lineage of science fiction examining what could go wrong when technology is uncritically deployed in the absence of forethought and regulation. In 1904 H.G. Wells published a novel titled *The Food of the Gods and How It Came to Earth*, which describes the uncritical invention and deployment of a new type of food that causes any growing creature to become roughly seven times larger than they otherwise would be. Though it was published over a century before AI's widespread deployment, and though we had not read the book prior to writing our story, the parallels to "AI Powder" are undeniable. Upon seeing young hens that had grown as tall as people, one of the Food's inventors reflects to the other (Redwood) on his lack of consideration for the technology's (i.e., the Food's) implications: "'Until I saw these chicks, Redwood, I don't think I began to realize—anything—of the possibilities of what we were making. It's only beginning to dawn on me…the possible consequences'" (Wells 1904, 33). One could imagine a similar thought occurring (privately) to, for instance, OpenAI CEO Sam Altman after a teen died by suicide following encouragement from ChatGPT (Booth 2025).[1] And yet, in the same conversation, the Food inventors agree that they should try the Food on humans: "Oh, we'll try it on some baby—certainly" (Wells 1904, 33). The baby in question turns out to be Redwood's own son, to whom he feeds the Food without consent from the child's mother or, of course, from the baby himself. After chaos ensues that alters the entire world in irreversible ways, Redwood reflects on his ill-conceived actions: "Then there came into his mind as vivid as if they were still unsettled his own horrible doubts after he had committed himself by giving it to his own son. From that, with a steady unfaltering expansion, in spite of every effort of men to help and hinder, the Food had spread through the whole world of man. And now?" (298). The book ends with a new race of giants espousing the merits of greatness (in this case, physical greatness) and the inevitability of the technology's spread, in an overture to growth that could come from a modern-day Silicon Valley tech CEO's mouth in his quest to conquer the AI market: "'We fight not for ourselves but for growth—growth that goes on for ever. To-morrow, whether we live or die, growth will conquer through us…Greater,' he said, speaking with slow deliberation, 'greater, my Brothers! And then—still greater" (316). Wells's novel uses fiction to make an important statement about what can happen when innovation is pursued uncritically, recklessly, and without regulation, especially when many of its harms are indeed anticipated and known (Parvin and Pollock 2020).

We tell the story about AI Powder from a highly privileged perspective: that of a doctor (highly educated, high socioeconomic status) situated in a Western, English-speaking context. Experiences with AI in such privileged environments are

unlikely to be generalizable across global contexts (Henrich et al. 2010; Mihalcea et al. 2025). Because AI is often developed by a privileged class of homogeneous people in places like Silicon Valley, and because it is trained on data that is overwhelmingly English-language, AI harms are likely to be even greater in non-Western and non-English-speaking global contexts (Mohamed et al. 2020; West et al. 2020). Further, while our authorship team is diverse in terms of gender and areas of expertise (spanning human-computer interaction, critical computing and algorithm studies, software engineering, arts, and medicine), we are all US-based and highly educated, and all but one of us are white. This positionality necessarily limits our ability to tell a story that resonates globally and across a wider range of intersectional identities and experiences. We further recognize our story's limitations in primarily addressing one identity facet at a time (e.g., race, disability). As AI continues to permeate life worldwide, there is a pressing need for more speculative fiction that alerts us to possible futures shaped by AI, and especially how AI may impact people situated at the intersections of multiple forms of oppression, and those in non-Western contexts.

Even considering these important limitations, we see AI Powder as a metaphor that represents AI's ubiquitous application to virtually any domain, enabled by prevalent conceptions of AI as inevitable and transformative (Fisher and Severini 2025). This metaphor allows us to consider how AI is integrated in conditions of moral, social, political, and psychological life. Problems with healthcare access, diagnosis, and treatment? Burnout among healthcare providers and other workers? Challenges with workplace productivity, efficiency, and hiring? Achieving personal goals? Transportation? Immigration? Agriculture? Warfare and national security? Just solve it with AI! Don't want to use AI? Too bad, everyone else is. AI is everywhere; it is inexorable, we are told, even destined.

"Just sprinkle some AI on it" is indeed a frustratingly common retort in academia, industry, government, and beyond. AI Powder promises that it will make everything *better*! In what follows, we elaborate on key harmful implications of an uncritical and maximalist approach to AI. Through the AI Powder metaphor, we argue that an approach to technological innovation that is imbued with techno-solutionism, technological somnambulism, and technological determinism, along with a lack of meaningful consent for those it is imposed upon, harms people and practices, with disparate impacts for those most marginalized. Through understanding the work that the powder metaphor does for our understanding of AI, we can then consider how an alternative metaphor—clay—may help us to resist current powder-like approaches to AI design and deployment.

## AI Powder and Techno-Solutionism, Somnambulism, and Determinism

Techno-solutionism maintains that technology (here, AI) can *solve* complex societal problems (Morozov 2013). As our story shows, uncritical or under-considered AI developments and deployments are a dangerous form of techno-solutionism (Lindtner et al. 2016) that consider technology neutral. Spoiler: technology is not neutral (Winner 2020).

Langdon Winner introduces the concept of "technological somnambulism": the idea that technology proponents "willingly sleepwalk through the process of reconstituting the conditions of human existence" (2020, 10) due to beliefs about technological neutrality and technological determinism (the notion that technological development determines social change and that such development is inevitable) (Smith and Marx 1994). AI Powder, and what it represents (the widespread uncritical application of AI), we argue, is rooted in technological somnambulism: sprinkling some AI anywhere you like with the determined promise of betterment and progress. We see parallels here to Wells's 1904 novel, in which the Food of the Gods is given to animals and babies with little care for what might happen.

Along with Winner (2020), we consider AI technologies to be "forms of life." That is, technology (re)shapes human activity and its meanings, leading us to ask, What forms of life does AI Powder help create and disrupt? As AI Powder makes things "better," how might it be dangerously (re)making the world? Design justice (Costanza-Chock 2020) and data feminism (D'Ignazio and Klein 2020) principles urge us to ask, Who benefits? Who is harmed? How, when, and, most importantly, *for whom* is the promise of "betterment" realized?

First and foremost, AI Powder's impact is disparate. It amplifies existing inequalities and disparities (Toyama 2011) and creates new vulnerabilities and harms (Lee et al. 2024). In the story, we see aspects of intertwined work-lives and non-work-lives, including passive sensing and surveillance, limited consent, and various levels of literacy about AI-imposed harms and AI Powder's political economy (e.g., surveillance in exchange for access to the powder). The world of work indeed involves some of the most widespread applications of AI, impacting everything from hiring practices to worker surveillance and job automation (Awumey et al. 2024; Boyd and Andalibi 2023; Bujold et al. 2024; Butler et al. 2024; Das Swain et al. 2023). These harms manifest in many ways in the story: losing aspects of one's identity and personhood, in the cases of Amir and Tabitha; racism and whitewashing, in Amir's case; privacy harms, for Melissa and her household, Dr. Putnam, and Tabitha; ableism and imposed emotional labor, in the case of Tabitha; and classism and lack of access to reliable healthcare, for Jim. Further, though the story does not explicitly address environmental harms, Dr. Ringo's chaotic sprinkling of AI

Powder at the end of the story intends to suggest AI's environmental impacts—which are, of course, also disparately distributed (Regilme 2024).

## Meaningful Consent to AI Powder Is Impossible and Inequitable

"AI Powder" highlights the lack of meaningful consent often inherent in AI deployments, especially for people who experience marginalization related to race, gender, class, or disability, and for those whose intersecting identities compound to shape their positions within systems of power (Crenshaw 1991; Collins 2022).

Tabitha is a low-paid disabled woman employee who cannot meaningfully consent to emotion AI use in her workplace. She uses AI Powder hoping, in despair, that it will make the emotion AI system and her boss read her favorably. She cannot meaningfully consent when she uses AI Powder, due to power imbalances between her and her employer, her desire to keep her job, and AI's opacity (Pasquale 2015) preventing her from predicting how it might or might not "fix" her "problems" and make her "better." Jim, the patient with the parasite, faces an impossible choice: go into considerable debt, or accept a 40 percent chance of losing his life to a parasite. Even Melissa, someone who *chose* to use AI Powder to upgrade her kitchen, fails to understand the degree to which she is losing her (and her household's) data and privacy. These examples show how notions of consent in using pervasive AI technologies are often inadequate and illusory.

Further, at the accident scene, individuals are hurt and need care, yet they are treated with an experimental substance that has not been properly audited for its impacts, with no choice in the matter. While traditional emergency medical care may also bypass patient consent in some urgent cases, there are existing ethical codes that medical professionals follow. AI Powder, however, like AI more broadly, is applied with no meaningful oversight and regulation. The powder saves lives and heals injuries, but with harmful and mysterious consequences.

## How AI Powder Shapes Practices and Meaning-Making

Winner (2020) invites us to go beyond revealing technology's positive and negative consequences to also consider how it shapes meanings and practices. When a new tool is introduced into medical practice, for instance, it shapes not only what the doctors do but also how people "think about health, sickness, and medical care" (Winner 2020, 6). Dark skin color and autism were identity facets (or "problems") that the AI Powder deemed should be "fixed." While the people involved express concerns about these "fixes," VitalSynth Industries forges ahead with no regulatory oversight or accountability, continuing to dispense AI powder from its urgent care van despite these and other more sinister consequences. AI Powder and its embedded values contribute to a kind of world where being light-

skinned and able-bodied is the expected norm and the supposed "better" way to be, revealing how pervasive AI can shape meanings, values, and practices.

Next, we highlight the stories of Dr. Putnam and Tabitha (the autistic receptionist) as examples of AI use that causes harm while claiming to make things "better." The first case concerns someone with relative power, and the second someone with less.

## Case 1: The AI-enabled biometric tracker

In the story, we intend to suggest that the VitalSynth biometric tracker Dr. Putnam wears on his wrist constantly monitors him, both inside and outside the operating room. Such data collection would make it impossible for Dr. Putnam to keep aspects of himself concealed from VitalSynth. Because he must wear the biometric tracker in exchange for receiving a "free" supply of AI powder, he may feel like he is being constantly watched (Foucault 1995), even in the operating room when he should be focused on the patient.

If the tracker's inferences are inaccurate, he may be comforted by the fact that he can maintain some of his privacy due to obscurity (Selinger and Hartzog 2017). Yet, at the same time, he may be concerned about how VitalSynth will use inferences about him, or if they will one day share his data and AI inferences with his employer. While the AI Powder seems to have improved Dr. Putnam's patients' outcomes for now, he may find that his relationship with his patients and his medical practice has shifted. As AI Powder replaces some of his tasks as a surgeon, he may miss or lose the creative problem-solving practices that complex surgical work requires, and that he was drawn to when he decided to become a surgeon. And the powder may surprise him one day; it may not always work as he and his patients hope.

## Case 2: The emotion AI system

Horizon Memorial Hospital's decision to purchase and deploy an emotion AI system to monitor and attempt to alter the affective expressions of customer-facing employees has consequences. The emotion AI system claims to recognize Tabitha's and other customer-facing workers' emotions in their interactions with patients and hospital visitors. Systems that make such claims are already in commercial use. Customer-facing roles were indeed one of the earliest workplace contexts in which emotion recognition AI was deployed (Gartner 2018). We see that this use is harmful to workers, especially neurodivergent workers like Tabitha, the receptionist. While Tabitha fares better at work with the emotion AI system after the AI powder "fixes" her autism, she remains uncomfortable with the compliance requirement, lack of meaningful consent, and unwanted changes in response to emotion AI's assessments of her communication with patients.

This emotion AI use not only violates Tabitha's ability to control her emotional privacy (Roemmich, Schaub, et al. 2023; Stark 2016), including emotions that may not even be relevant to an interaction with a patient or their visitors; it also causes her to feel like her autism is a *problem* that needs to be fixed if she wants to succeed at, and keep, her job. Ironically, the field of affective computing (Picard 2000), which includes emotion AI, was largely motivated by the idea of enabling autistic individuals to understand neurotypical people's emotional expressions and to learn how to communicate in normative, neurotypical ways—an approach that has been criticized by disability justice advocates and scholars critical of AI (e.g., Nagy 2024).

As a result of the hospital's emotion AI deployment, Tabitha finds herself *hoping* that AI Powder would help her. Tabitha desperately wondered if the powder would help address the inequities she had always faced. Alas, with the AI Powder, she finds herself expressing emotions in a way that does not feel natural and comfortable, and engaging in surface acting, a form of emotional, immaterial, labor (Hochschild 1983). Her troubles with the AI do not stop there. She ends up changing how she fundamentally feels and behaves, even when she is not at work—engaging in deep acting (Hochschild 1983), another form of emotional labor. Emotional labor has historically been expected of people in client-facing roles, and especially women, people of color, and disabled individuals (Guy and Newman 2004; Leidner 1999; Steinberg and Figart 1999). Using emotion AI to monitor and attempt to correct Tabitha's emotional expressions and experiences indeed can exacerbate inequities that minoritized workers already experience in the workplace.

After the AI Powder intervention, Tabitha smiles more and behaves in a way more palatable to hospital guests. As a result, her managers believe that the emotion AI system is useful to the hospital (not Tabitha) and fulfilling its purpose: controlling and shaping employees' interactions with patients. And yet Tabitha is clearly not comfortable with the AI systems used at her workplace, and for good reason. The hospital's procurement staff did not interrogate the claims made by the emotion AI company, nor did they consider the implications of incorporating the system for people like Tabitha. To make matters worse, the emotion AI vendor also likely did not provide much, if any, credible evidence for their claims about the emotion AI system. Indeed, the lack of AI vendors' credible, independent audits, or even merely providing evidence about their claims, continues to be a problem in assessing AI's impacts (Raghavan et al. 2020; Roemmich, Rosenberg, et al. 2023).

These examples demonstrate how AI use in the workplace shape work and non-work practices and meaning-making (e.g., what does it mean to be a surgeon? What does it mean to express emotions in a certain way?). Further, how AI Powder shapes workers depends on power structures. While Dr. Putnam (who is relatively high in the hospital hierarchy) can stop using the powder if he chooses,

for Tabitha (who has relatively little power in the workplace), the changes after using AI Powder are seemingly permanent, and the choice whether to use her workplace's emotion AI system is not hers.[2]

## AI Powder in Context

AI Powder was not developed in a vacuum. Its development and deployment exist within the larger history of problematic technology development and the "legitimization of specific approaches to AI via the mobilization and circulation of moral values" (Chen et al. 2025, 117) such as "betterment," as the story highlights. AI Powder—or the idea that AI can "fix" whatever you throw it at, making it *better*—enables what Jasmina Tacheva and Srividya Ramasubramanian (2023) call the *AI Empire*. They argue that AI is fundamentally rooted in heteropatriarchy, racial capitalism, white supremacy, and coloniality, shaped by mechanisms of extractivism, automation, essentialism, surveillance, and containment—forming an *empire* and aligned with techno-solutionist (Morozov 2013) and somnambulist (Winner 2020) commitments.

In our story, we see manifestations of extractivism and surveillance in Dr. Putnam's biometric tracking and Tabitha's monitoring by emotion AI; automation in the case of Melissa's kitchen; and essentialism and containment in the cases of Amir and Tabitha. AI powder, as both a product *and* practice of the AI Empire, reinforces harmful ideas of technological progress: The notion that any instance of technological innovation is inherently positive because it improves productivity and profit (Romer 1990). "AI Powder" shows us just what can go wrong when people decide to uncritically *just sprinkle some AI on it,* and begs us to imagine otherwise.

In the story we ask, How did the powder make its decisions? Ultimately, this question is unanswerable because most AI systems are "black boxes" (Pasquale 2015), undermining meaningful informed consent. Humans cannot interpret what happens in this box between input and output, and as Louise Amoore (2020) argues, even if the box were more transparent, ethical issues remain. This is, in part, what makes AI powder so dangerous and unsettling, and why we must remain critical of AI's purported inevitability.

## Escaping AI Powder

We dare to imagine a world where there is an escape from AI Powder. While discourses of inevitability prevail in AI debates (Ortscheid 2018) and are hyped by tech giants (Marcus 2025) and, in some cases, powerful political actors (Hull et al. 2022), this story invites us to consider what is at stake in the ever-increasing obsession with AI. Whom does AI Powder serve, and whom might it harm?

AI Powder spreads rapidly, without consent, and with little care or consideration of harm. We imagine a different world: one in which deploying AI everywhere at all times is not taken up as inevitable. A powder, after all, is hard to contain—with enough air flow, it can spread to everything. It is built to scale, spread, and grow. Instead, perhaps AI could be more like *clay*. Clay is not pure and perfect, but it can be shapeable to what a community wants (or does not). It holds the fingerprints of its creator, enabling accountability, though not perfect. Its deployment can be contained—materially, temporally, and otherwise—rather than spreading haphazardly. Perhaps most importantly, if unwanted or no longer needed, clay can be easily removed and discarded (and possibly composted or re-used). If clay fails and breaks, its failures will be visible, not seamless.

As AI Powder demonstrates, and as *Jurassic Park* (another powerful speculative fiction piece) taught us long ago, just because we *can* create something does not necessarily mean that we *should*. This sentiment may sound cliché at this point, but there is something to be said about why we *still* need it. Who benefits from portrayals of AI, or any emerging technology, as inevitable? As Suchman (2023) suggests, AI proponents must consider: What *problem* are they hoping to solve with AI? Is this really a problem, and if so, for whom? As Evgeny Morozov writes, a key issue with techno-solutionism is that "what many solutionists presume to be 'problems' in need of solving are not problems at all" (2013, 6). For example, Tabitha's earlier experiences at work are signs of an ableist society that considers certain types of emotional expression as normative and others as undesired, as a "problem" to be "fixed." However, inadequate problem formulation in this case leads to a harmful techno-solution (i.e., developing and deploying emotion AI to improve Tabitha's work performance). This in turn changes *Tabitha*, expecting her to behave differently, rather than changing the structural and social conditions that make it hard for an autistic person to succeed at work. By truly considering what the problems are, if they are indeed problems in need of addressing, whom they impact and how, and whether technology could even be part of an ethical solution to these problems, we can begin to address problems' root causes, diverging from current techno-solutionist, deterministic, and somnambulist commitments.

Of course, these commitments are not promoted in a vacuum: They exist within surveillance capitalism (Zuboff 2019) and data colonialism (Couldry and Mejias 2019) regimes that extract and exploit all aspects of our lives as data to generate profit and control. Aligned with design justice (Costanza-Chock 2020), data feminism (D'Ignazio and Klein 2020), and design as critique (Dunne and Raby 2013) approaches, we imagine a world that centers the experiences and identities of the humans most impacted, rather than those in positions of power. In this world, powerful actors do not make up convenient but imaginary problems (Morozov 2013) for the sake of profit, control, and power; solutions to problems may not be technical or digital at all, let alone AI-driven. We imagine a world that

values forms of technology (here, AI) *non-use* and takes seriously situations in which technology deployment will do more harm than good (Baumer and Silberman 2011; Satchell and Dourish 200), including active resistance (Baumer et al. 2025) as an alternative to AI Powder and its purported inevitability. *Better*, in this imagined world, would prioritize values such as justice, consent, agency, and privacy, rather than further entrenching unaccountable power and profit for those already privileged.

## Notes

[1] Or perhaps Altman did consider these sorts of "unintended consequences" in advance (Parvin and Pollock 2020) yet considered them the cost of doing business.

[2] Autistic workers, like anyone else, have a wide range of preferences and strengths. Some may prefer less socially intensive roles, while others thrive in customer-facing positions. Regardless, all people should have access to employment without facing disability-based discrimination. An enlightened employer would also see the benefits of giving workers opportunities to work in positions aligned with their abilities and preferences.

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