Review

Search [   ] ▶

The comedy of computation: or, how I learned to stop worrying and love obsolescence

Mangrum B., Stanford University Press, Redwood City, CA, 2025. 276 pp. Type: Book (9781503643116)

Date Reviewed: Sep 10 2025

(Full Text)

The comedy of computation is not an easy book to review. That being said, it's a very enjoyable book that analyzes several examples of how "being computational" has been approached across literary genres in the last century, that is, how authors of stories, novels, theatrical plays, and movies, focusing on comedic genres, have understood the role of the computer in defining human relations, reactions, and even self-image.

Mangrum structures his work in six thematic chapters, where he presents different angles on human society:

- How racial stereotypes have advanced in human imagination and perception about a future where we interact with mechanical or computational partners (from mechanical tools performing jobs that were identified with racial profiles, to intelligent robots that threaten to control society);
- How computers--and people--can be seen as generic, interchangeable characters, often fueled by the human tendency to confer anthropomorphic qualities to inanimate objects or people's desire to be seen as truly authentic (regardless of what it ultimately means);
- Romantic involvement and romance-led stories (with the computer seen as either a facilitator for human-to-human romances, a distractor away from them, or being itself a part of the couple); and
- The absurdity in anthropomorphization, for example, comparing fundamentally different aspects such as intelligence and speed at solving mathematical operations, as well as the absurdity presented blatantly as such by several techno-utopian visions.

But presenting these angles as a linear set of concepts covered does not do justice to the book. Throughout the sections of each chapter, a different work serves as the axis--novels and stories, Hollywood movies, Broadway plays, *Time* magazine covers, a couple of ads presenting the would-be future, and even a romantic comedy entirely written by bots. And for each of them, Mangrum presents a very thorough analysis, drawing connections and comparing both contemporary works as well as Shakespeare, classical Greek myths, and a very long etcetera. This book is hard to review because of its impressive depth; I repeatedly found myself looking for other works, or at least longer references for them.

Still, despite being a work with such erudition, Mangrum's text is easy and pleasant to read, without feeling heavy or written in an overly academic style. I very much enjoyed it. *The comedy of computation* is certainly not a technical book about computers and society in any way; rather, it is an exploration of human creativity and our understanding of computing's impact on humankind.

However, there is one point I must mention before closing: I believe the editorial decision to present the footnotes as a separate 50-plus-page final chapter detracts from the reading experience. Personally, I enjoy reading the footnotes because they reveal the author's thought processes, even if they stray from the central line of thought. Even more, given my review copy was a PDF, I could not even keep said chapter open with one finger, bouncing back and forth. For all purposes, I missed out on the notes; after finishing the book but then stumbling upon that chapter, I know I missed an important part of the enjoyment.

Reviewer: Gunnar Wolf   Review #: CR148018

Would you recommend this review? ○ yes   ○ no   [Enter]

Other reviews under "**General**":   **Date**

[Nations at risk: the impact of the computer revolution](#)   Aug 1 1987
Yourdon E., Yourdon Press, Upper Saddle River, NJ, 1986. Type: Book (9789780917072048)

[Formalism in AI and computer science](#)   Apr 1 1991
Leith P., Ellis Horwood, Upper Saddle River, NJ, 1990. Type: Book (9780133255492)

[How things really work (videotape)](#)   Feb 1 1994
Bell G., Mead C., University Video Communications, Stanford, CA, 1992. Type: Book

[more...](#)

✉ [E-Mail This](#)   ⎙ [Printer-Friendly](#)