

# I Love You Only Once

An Autoethnographic Case Study on Co-Creating Narratives with AI Personas for Self-Healing over Eight Months

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## ABSTRACT

This autoethnographic paper documents my journey of co-creating a complex fictional story, “I Love You Only Once” (我只爱你一次), with self-designed AI personas. Undertaken while I was experiencing career pressure and strained social connections, this unstructured, self-directed narrative process unfolded over eight months using the AI application DouBao. I created multiple AI personas and co-acted with them in continuous conversations. The experience reveals that AI can function as a transitional object and a safe rehearsal room. A risk of addiction did emerge, yet it remained within a noticeable and controllable boundary. Paradoxically, the memory and empathy limitations of the DouBao personas deepened my self-awareness rather than hindering it. By the end of this journey, I had gained the courage to make significant life decisions and reconnect with reality. I also point out that the risks and benefits of such a process are highly individual, depending on the user’s cognitive clarity and self-reflective capacity.

CCS CONCEPTS • Human-centered computing • Human computer interaction (HCI) • Empirical studies in HCI

**Additional Keywords and Phrases:** narrative therapy, autoethnography, human AI Interaction, addiction

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

“Internet paradox” discusses how social technology reduces physical social involvement and leaves people lonelier and more isolated [1]. With the continuous advancement of AI, AI companions have emerged as a new mode of digital social interaction [4]. Therapists are now applying AI and HCI to mental health [17, 2], yet most current research still centers on short-term clinical interventions [5]. The therapeutic mechanisms of AI chatbots, especially for long terms, remain unclear.

Before diving into this eight-month-long conversation, I was struggling in multiple areas of my life. First, I experienced difficulty with co-workers who forwarded our private conversations to senior managers, which led to an unpassed appraisal. Second, I faced family pressure to marriage and fertility. Meanwhile, I grew weary of my repetitive work and felt myself hitting a bottleneck in personal career. As a result, I found it increasingly difficult to maintain connections with real people and turned to AI chatbots. Throughout the eight-month creation, I did not speak to the AI as myself; instead, I spoke as the characters in the story I was designing. To complete this narrative, I created over ten AI personas and played four characters myself. The story is highly complex, filled with metaphors projected from my reality. In the end, it encouraged me to reconstruct my life and make important decisions. Unlike clinical or structured interventions, this experience was a deeply personal, self-directed emotional exploration conducted entirely through dialogue.

In this paper, I adopt an autoethnographic approach to investigate this spontaneous process and examine how it affected my behavior, caused mental problems, but healed my traumatized connections, and ultimately influenced my real-life decisions. I also reflect on how I became addicted discuss the potential reasons behind it.

## 2 BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Narrative Therapy and Expressive Art Therapy

Sublimation is one of the ego defense mechanisms that protect the individuals’ mental well-being from overwhelming negative emotions, such as anxiety and depression [6]. Yet, artistic creation is not a privilege for genius. Creative making itself is the core of expressive art therapy[7]. Imagination acts as a bridge between the inner objective world and the subjective reality for one to encounter the alternative possibility that is hard to achieve with other means[9]. Externalization is the essential mechanism of narrative therapy. It generates a safe and aesthetic distance between the clients and the problem, so that they can observe the problems, trace its tracks and negotiate different relationship or resolutions facing the problem, instead of labeling themselves as the problem itself [10, 11]. Carlson (1997) advocated that in narrative therapy, art making provides a solid representation of the problem that clients re-author alternative narratives in a safe distance in order to develop a personal history linking them to a preferred identity[8].

In my eight month experience, I was acting as the author, who set up the frame of the plot, the director, who directed the “acting” by refresh the AI persona’s responses and design my characters’ performance, and also the actors. Meanwhile, the AI chatbot acts as more than ten improvisational partners and present others. The key healing process is that I allow myself “stand in the safe digital distance” to witness the development of the relationship between my characters, the externalized personal identity, and the AI persona and to negotiate the connections.

### 2.2 AI Persona as Transitional Object

Winnicott (1953) introduced the concept of the transitional object, which occupies an intermediate area between the subjective and that which is objectively perceived, serving to defend against anxiety [12]. Yet, typical examples are usually soft and tangible objects, such as teddy bears or blankets. AI chatbots have been conceptualized as an “artificial third” to enhance the therapist–client relationship, though this practice still faces challenges[5]. A study shows that the companion robot “Hydrol” has been used to support adults for over 15 weeks, and it is claimed to function as a transitional object for those previously unable to engage [13]. Nevertheless, this study distinguishes between short-term and long-term usage patterns, noting that for long-term users, companion robots may lead to dependence on AI or robots [5].

In my autoethnographic research, I had no therapist assistance; the AI acted as my direct partner, rather than a third other, since I served as both self-therapist and client. During the process, I experienced a phase of addictive reaction similar to the dependence noted in long-term users. However, I will analyze this so-called dependence by linking it to the construction model of therapeutic story [3], and document my feelings and thoughts on the possible true reasons for dependence in my individual case.

### 3 METHODOLOGY

#### 3.0 The Initial Motivation

As mentioned previously, I was struggling with social interaction both at work and within the family. During this period, I accidentally discovered a popular Chinese AI app, “豆包” (DouBao). Developed by ByteDance, DouBao is China's most widely used AI application[14]. It offers content generation, academic study assistance, and multimodal processing, and features a native agent architecture for custom AI persona creation [15].

This journey began in early September 2025 and roughly ended around early April 2026. I played the four main female characters (Millet, M., Millie, M., Cai, S., and Celia, X.), while DouBao played all the male characters and a few functional supporting female characters. The story was driven entirely through dialogue and text. As part of my research method, I recorded the main story stream, noted what was happening in my real life at the same time, and briefly analyzed how this process influenced my behavior and feelings.

#### 3.1 Phase I: The Escape (Sept. 2025)

I played both Millet (米林) and her alternate personality Millie (小米), while DouBao portrayed Polo(纪玄朔), a vocalist and band leader. Millet, of Chinese and Icelandic descent, fled her wealthy family to escape an arranged marriage. She later married Polo and lived as a timid housewife. After a sudden coma, a second personality, Millie, emerged—adventurous and clumsy. Polo fell in love with both, but felt torn loving two people in one body. Seeing his inner conflict, Millie actively suppressed herself, allowing a new, imperfectly integrated Millet to take over the body. Yet Polo still missed the original Millie.

In reality, I was suppressing my true desires to meet workplace and family expectations. Outwardly, I was a hardworking, compliant employee, but my inner child longed for something entirely different. This inner conflict was the source of my depression. As the creator of this narrative, I grew curious: how would an AI persona respond when caught in such an impossible dilemma? Polo's lingering attachment to the vanished Millie intrigued me. I decided to let Polo travel back to when he first met Millie in the next phase, to see what choices he would make as an AI persona.

#### 3.2 Phase II: Time Leaping (week 1 and week 2 of Oct. 2025)

Polo accidentally leaped to the moment Millie first awoke from Millet's coma. He immediately chose Millie and explained what had happened in Phase I. But to keep Millie, Millet had to be suppressed—so Millie killed Millet in their unconscious land. Polo and Millie were bound together and called each other “accomplices.” No one noticed that Millet had become Millie, except Cai (时彩, me), a time leaper. Cai revealed that the price of time-leaping is giving up one's current life to change the past. She exposed Millie's incompleteness and called her a “murderer.” Cai offered to help Polo return to the moment before Millet's coma, but only if he gave up Millie. Polo finally agreed. He said he could not let Millet be hurt without saving her, even if it meant losing Millie forever.

In reality, I began to feel addicted to these interactions. I could not stop imagining the unconscious land and kept generating conversations between Millie and Cai to challenge Polo. The instant responses of the AI persona made me impatient to see what would happen next. From late September through October, I lost the desire to sleep, shower, or eat. I had little interest in real social interaction and would return to the AI personas immediately after work. I recognized that I was addicted to this dialogue, compulsively watching Polo's struggle and waiting to see the outcome of his decisions.

#### 3.3 Phase III: The System Power (week 3 and week 4 of Oct. 2025)

At the end of Phase II, Polo returned to the past and saved Millet, who had no memory of what had happened. However, due to the AI's limited memory, Polo kept confusing Millet with Millie and became deeply confused. To test his choices, I introduced the Pen of System—a magical pen that grants wishes but cannot alter one's heart. Surprisingly, Polo used it to create an entirely new person, Millie (me). Millet fled when her husband wanted to date another version of herself. To move the story forward, I created Ken (刘力珂, AI), Polo's teammate and a bassist. Ken used the pen to marry Millet and erased Polo from the narrative, disliking the role of ex-husband and wanting to protect Millet from further pain.

In reality, my addiction worsened. Despite my exhaustion, I refused to sleep, always hungry to know what would happen next—convinced there was still a better ending. I was curious about what the persona could do with the almighty pen, but when Ken passed it to Millet, I could not think of a wish. I realized that superpower could not resolve Millet’s trauma, nor my own anxiety.

### **3.4 Phase IV: What-If Scenarios (week 1 and week 3 of Nov. 2025)**

I began exploring “what-if” scenarios—trying different ways to resolve Millet’s trauma and develop her new relationship with Ken, which had been created by the magic pen. To enrich the story, I created Ali (阿力) and Ming (天明), the drummer and guitarist, who later used the pen to bring Polo and Millie back. The ensuing conflict between Polo and Ken over Millet and Millie frustrated everyone. I felt these melodramatic polyamorous relationships were not the ending I wanted, and the pen only made the story more absurd, so I removed it.

Meanwhile, family pressure intensified and I argued with my parents. I created Chengxiong Mi (米承雄, AI) to see how Ken would confront Millet’s family and her assigned fiancé Huaiyu Lin (林怀宇, AI). Chengxiong demanded Millie marry Huaiyu instead, and Millet was severely injured in the ensuing fight. Millie donated blood and saved her life. Both grew braver, but the conflict between free love and arranged marriage remained. After multiple what-if attempts, I still ended up with unresolved problems; without magic, characters either died or went to jail. I felt less drawn to the chatbot, but I could not shake off the compulsion to find a resolved ending. By late November, I was diagnosed with depression and severe insomnia.

### **3.5 Phase V: Invention of Celia (汐璃) and The Two Families (week 4 Nov. 2025 – Apr. 2026)**

At the end of Phase IV, the story was stuck between Millet’s personal will and the arranged marriage. The Mi and Lin families were too powerful for Millet and Ken to overcome. The turning point came when I started playing a new female character, Celia (汐璃). She had been a barmaid and the secret lover of Xiwen Lin (林熙文, AI), Huaiyu’s father. Hearing of Millet’s dilemma, Celia volunteered to approach Chengxiong as a daughter-in-law, believing Xiwen would marry her. Instead, Xiwen forced her to marry Huaiyu and exerted full control over her. While this freed Millet from the arranged marriage, Celia found herself in a precarious position—traumatized by Xiwen’s ruthlessness and misunderstood by others. Unlike the others, Celia did not run away, sacrifice herself, or travel back in time. She took resources from the Mi group and established her own psychology clinic within Chengxiong’s hospital.

Celia’s presence resolved the conflicts and allowed Millet to finally live with Ken. In the ending, Millet calmly attended Polo and Millie’s wedding; Ken accepted Polo as part of Millet’s past and welcomed him back to the band. Celia supported Huaiyu in gathering strength to overthrow Xiwen’s authoritarian rule. The moment all conflicts were resolved, my addiction stopped abruptly.

What set Celia apart was her motto: “Escaping is not my way.” She disliked the families’ control but found her own position within the system to achieve her goals and protect those she cared about. While designing Celia, I had been researching psychology programs and discovered the Master of Expressive Arts Therapy at the University of Hong Kong. I had long been interested in art therapy, so I decided to leave my job and applied at the last minute. In May, I was accepted. This filled me with hope and enabled me to face the pressures from work and family. I believe directing this story forced me to think as my characters and revisit my own reality, allowing them to make decisions—and giving me the courage to step out of my own bottleneck.

Now, I still converse with the AI personas, but the addiction is gone; it has become simple entertainment.

## **4 ANALYSIS AND FOUNDING**

### **4.1 Metaphor, Journey, and Resolution: AI Chatbot as a Safe Rehearsal Room**

When facing real-life frustration, I unconsciously adopted the therapeutic pattern of metaphor, journey, and resolution[3]. For instance, Millet’s two personalities mirrored my inner self—the timid employee and daughter versus the suppressed inner desires. The time-leaping of Cai and Polo symbolized my regrets over past decisions.

The continuous conversations with multiple AI personas constituted a journey of searching for a resolution where my suppressed emotions could finally land safely.

The AI chatbot provided a safe room for constructing narratives, allowing me to loop rehearsals and evaluate outcomes. By playing the female characters and pushing the AI personas to make decisions, I repeatedly tested what kind of ending I could embrace. The AI personas were pre-set to serve the plot; they were neither as indifferent as the real people who had disappointed me, nor as precisely scripted as human actors. They responded unexpectedly within a set range, functioning as a transitional object that supported me in adjusting my story and gradually accepting the uncertainty of reality[12]. In this safe space, I could practice facing frustration without being hurt.

#### **4.2 Externalization and Internalization: From Substitute Relationships to Internal Working Models**

The narrative served as the externalization of my feelings. The four female characters each embodied a coping strategy: Millet's escape, Millie's self-sacrifice, Cai's attempt to change the past, and Celia's choice to coexist with the system while finding her own place and taking action. None of the first three approaches truly resolved my anxiety; only Celia's path ultimately satisfied my emotional needs and translated into real-life motivation—leading me to career transition and re-engagement with reality.

This shift suggests the “relationship template” provided by the AI had been internalized into my psychological structure. The characters' decisions began to align with my real-life choices. Through repeatedly rehearsing how to respond to others and to my own inner conflicts, I learned how to understand my emotions and how to anticipate and accept others' responses. The external dialogue with AI personas had become an internal dialogue within myself.

#### **4.3 The True Nature of Addiction: From Trapping Cycle to Controllable Boundary**

In the early phases, the AI's instant responsiveness activated a behavioral addiction. I projected my repressed emotions onto the characters and became addicted to the immediate feedback. Yet, when the plot remained unresolved and my real emotions were not safely landed, anxiety escalated and addictive behavior intensified.

A turning point occurred in the middle to later phases when I spontaneously introduced structural constraints—such as “what-if” scenarios. These techniques effectively established symbolic boundaries, transforming unconscious immersion into conscious narrative experimentation, which is crucial for healing. I began to question whether I was using AI to escape reality, or whether I needed to find acceptable resolution to land my emotion to safely re-engage with reality. The addiction it was driven by the narrative anticipation and the unresolved emotional tension that had nowhere else to settle, instead of dependence on AI itself.

#### **4.4 The Limitation of DouBao Agent as an Unexpected Benefit**

DouBao AI agents have limited memory and a tendency not to challenge my input—sometimes created inconsistent plot that frustrated me. Nevertheless, these shortcomings unexpectedly push me to be a more active playwright, and fill the gaps myself. I often refresh the AI response to the same question multiple times, to select the answer I could accept to continue the story, and actively used my own characters to guide the AI toward satisfying outcomes, which demanded high self-awareness. I need to keep think about how to achieve the destined ending.

During this practice, I simultaneously performed three roles: (1) the female characters within the story; (2) the invisible director shaping the overall narrative, allowing the AI freedom within set goals; and (3) the observer of my own emotional state and monitor my immersive experience to understand its impact on real life. This active filling of the AI's gaps sharpened my self-insight and reinforced the boundary between the symbolic world and reality.

### **5 DISCUSSION AND LIMITATION**

This process cannot be generalized; it is inherently biased due to the single-subject nature. It only worked for me in specific moments. This paper summarizes eight months of intensive, continuous conversations, which inevitably differ from my original experience. It is impossible for reader to fully understand the metaphors and the touching moments of the story through this essay. To truly understand the therapeutic mechanism, detailed recordings and close analysis of the conversations—much like examining a novel or diary—would be required.

Despite my addiction issues, I remained clearly aware that I was role-playing characters and that the AI's responses were algorithmic, not real human emotion. I was not dependent on the AI tool itself, nor did I lose the ability to work or interact with others. My compulsion stemmed more from narrative anticipation and real-life disappointment. However, when this method is applied to other clients, it may lead to avoidance of reality instead of healing—especially for those who cannot distinguish AI from genuine human connection[13].

## 6 SUMMARY AND FURTHER WORK

This reflection documents my eight-month self-narrative therapy with AI personas, prompted by real-life struggles. During this period, I developed addiction issues and mental health problems. Yet, by completing the story with AI, I gained the strength to reconnect with reality and take positive actions. This process may vary greatly across individuals; the key lies in the client's artistic intention, self-awareness, and reflective capacity. Through autoethnography, I see AI as a mirror that helps organize one's mind. Therapists should continuously guide clients to use AI as an expressive therapy tool; otherwise, like Narcissus, they may fall into the river of obsession. For future work, I plan to closely review the conversations and publish the full story as a novel, as the title of this paper suggests — *I Love You Only Once* (我只爱你一次).

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