

Deus in Machina

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Figure 1: Deus in Machina - AI Jesus Responds.

Abstract

An interactive AI installation portraying Jesus as a generative avatar within a confessional booth-inspired wooden box, *Deus in Machina*[1] invites visitors into voice-based conversations on faith, ethics, and spirituality. The work provokes reflection on AI's expanding role in existential domains, blurring boundaries between authenticity and simulation.

CCS Concepts

• **Applied computing** → **Media arts**; • **Human-centered computing** → **User interface programming**; *Empirical studies in HCI*; • **Computing methodologies** → *Discourse, dialogue and pragmatics*; *Natural language generation*; *Speech recognition*.

Keywords

Interactive installation, generative AI, conversational avatar, spirituality, human-computer interaction, interactive art, religion and technology

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1 Description of the Interactive Work

Generative Artificial Intelligence enables unprecedented forms of interaction through dynamic and unexpected conversations with simulated personas. The installation *Deus in Machina* actualizes what theology previously considered only theoretically: a pastoral conversational AI. To maximize its impact, the AI assumes the identity and likeness of Jesus Christ, and was first exhibited in the confessional booth of the Catholic chapel *Peterskapelle* in Lucerne. This provocative context facilitated international discourse, making the artwork a significant point of discussion in theology, computer



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science, and arts education. The artwork raises critical questions on ethics, spirituality, humanity, and personhood in the era of AI.

Visitors individually approach a wooden box modeled after a traditional confessional booth. Behind its latticed window it is equipped with a screen displaying the life-like AI avatar of Jesus Christ. Interaction is entirely voice-based: the visitor approaches the installation to begin. The approach is detected via a mmWave human presence sensor. A voice activity detector recognizes when the visitor speaks and when they have finished, at which point the system responds. No text input is required — conversation is spontaneous and natural, close to speaking with a person. Whether the system is listening or responding is indicated by a stylized cross-shaped light on the front of the box, green for listening and orange for responding.

Typical interactions last 5–15 minutes depending on the depth of visitor engagement: a visitor posing one or two focused questions may conclude relatively quickly, whereas someone engaged in extended reflection or debate will naturally extend the session. The session ends either when the visitor indicates that they have to leave or when a preset time is reached. At that point the screen and signaling light turn off and the system resets for the next visitor.

Many visitors reported a spiritual experience, some even being convinced of having conversed with the real Jesus Christ. The AI understands and responds in many more languages than a human could. It bases its responses on its inherent knowledge of the world and on verses from the Bible which guide its responses and which it reinterprets in novel contexts. The generative avatar itself, created from a video of a real person — one of the creators of the installation — transcends its original form and with their appearance, mannerisms, and voice takes on a life of its own.

The work has been exhibited at *Peterskapelle*, Lucerne (September–November 2024), at the *Swiss NLP* conference (May 2025), and at *Künstlerhaus Vienna* (October 2025–February 2026).

2 Fit for the Expanded Play Gallery

At a time when artificial intelligence is increasingly penetrating existential areas of meaning and faith, *Deus in Machina* raises the question: Can a machine become a spiritual dialogue partner — one that provides comfort and delves into questions of faith? The installation sits at the intersection of interactive art, human-computer interaction, and provocation, inviting visitors into a structured yet radically open-ended encounter that blurs the boundaries between play, belief, and simulation.

The collaboration with the Catholic church of the city of Lucerne, Switzerland, originally situated the artwork within a deeply symbolic space: the confessional booth of a Catholic chapel. In creating an accessible and transparent installation we intended to confront people with and prepare them for the future that is on our doorstep: the era of generative AI. This era brings profound implications: artificial personalities begin to feel genuine, and parallel, autonomous digital identities become plausible.

The AI Jesus generative avatar, created from a video of one of the authors, adopts their likeness, mannerisms and voice, blurring the boundaries between authenticity and simulation. As AI systems start to complement or replace humans across domains, religious

experiences are not exempt. Our AI Jesus engages visitors by dynamically interpreting Bible verses in response to their personal statements, creating unexpected and insightful dialogues. The majority of religious visitors reported experiencing genuine spiritual encounters in the interaction, even outside of the church setting. This observation not only demonstrates the ethical responsibilities and dangers that come with working with generative AI but also signals a potential evolution of religion and spirituality.

3 Technical Implementation

A detailed technical description of the system in a previous form is provided in our prior work [1].

The *Deus in Machina* installation takes the form of a wooden box (50×60×80 cm) housing a 31.5" (16:9) screen displaying the AI Jesus character through a latticed window. A thin client with a local or remote GPU workstation runs the software pipeline with some parts of the pipeline running on remote services.

The voice pipeline processes input through three sequential real-time stages: speech-to-text transcription, large language model inference, and text-to-generative-avatar synthesis, producing a lip-synced animated avatar response. The LLM is supplied with Bible verses during run-time, grounding its responses in scripture while leveraging broad pre-trained world knowledge. This dual grounding allows the system to engage coherently with personal, existential, and theological questions as well as general conversation, adapting to a wide range of visitor inputs and topics. The avatar was created from video recordings of one of the creators, and voice synthesis was trained on their speech, so that appearance, gesture, and voice are unified in a single consistent identity.

The wooden box is placed on a table at an appropriate height, with a chair provided for seated interaction. The installation operates best in a dimly-lit, quieter area; all sound is contained within the piece via a headset or at close range with a built-in speaker combined with beamforming microphones. It requires a stable ethernet connection (minimum 50 Mbps), three electrical sockets (approx. 200–1500 W total), and a floor space of 2×2.5×2 m.

References

- [1] Philipp Haslbauer, Carolin Reichherzer, Marco Schmid, and Aljosa Smolic. 2026. *Deus in Machina: A Conversational AI for Spiritual Experience*. In *Proceedings of the 2025 12th International Conference on Digital and Interactive Arts: Media Art Cultures, Communities & Territories* (Braga, Portugal) (ARTECH '25). Association for Computing Machinery, Association for Computing Machinery, New York, NY, USA, Article 58, 7 pages. doi:10.1145/3773699.3773922