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Narwhals, Unicorns, and Big Tech's Messiah Complex: A Transdisciplinary Allegory for the Age of AI

Jasmin COWIN
TESOL/Bilingual Department, Touro University
New York, NY 10036 USA

ABSTRACT

This essay investigates the Messiah Savior Complex in Big Tech, where artificial intelligence is presented as a redemptive force capable of solving humanity's most urgent challenges. Using the historical analogy of the narwhal tusk trade, in which tusks were sold as unicorn horns to European elites, the analysis illustrates how myth-based narratives continue to influence technological realities. In contemporary discourse, these narratives take the form of hyperstitions, which are beliefs that become real through repetition, institutional reinforcement, and collective investment. Such dynamics obscure empirical scrutiny and displace critical engagement with the socio-technical realities of AI development. The essay argues that magical thinking and industry promotion often sustain these belief structures to deflect regulatory oversight and maintain public enthusiasm. Rather than rejecting technological progress, the paper calls for a transdisciplinary framework that treats AI as embedded in systems requiring accountability, transparency, and contextual awareness.

Keywords: Messiah Savior Complex, AI governance, hyperstitions, socio-technical systems, Leopold Aschenbrenner, narwhals, unicorns, AI policy, cosmiconomic thinking, transdisciplinarity.

1. INTRODUCTION

"Myth is much more important and true than history. History is just journalism and you know how reliable that is."
Joseph Campbell, The Power of Myth (1988)

Campbell's observation about myth's power over factual history proves particularly relevant when examining how societies embrace transformative technologies. This paper examines how contemporary AI policy exhibits the same patterns of magical thinking that historically drove irrational investment in supposed miracle technologies, arguing that the perceived transformative power of AI mirrors medieval Europe's faith in unicorn horn remedies. This paper posits that technological magical thinking, a cognitive bias whereby societies attribute transformative or redemptive potential to emerging technologies in the absence of longitudinal empirical validation, constitutes a persistent obstacle to data-driven evaluation and effective governance of advanced innovations.

Throughout history, the narratives we construct around powerful innovations often matter more than their actual capabilities, shaping investment, policy, and public perception in ways that can persist for centuries, even when built on fundamental misconceptions. The story of narwhal tusks being traded as unicorn horns serves as a compelling historical precedent for understanding how technological magical thinking operates across centuries. Vikings harvested narwhal tusks off the coast of Greenland, trading them as unicorn horns, and the rarity and mystery surrounding them fueled myths and legends. These tusks were thought to cure illnesses and protect monarchs from poison, with figures like Ivan the Terrible calling for his narwhal horn staff on his deathbed, hoping for salvation. Danish kings built thrones from these tusks, and English privateer Martin Frobisher gifted Queen Elizabeth I narwhal tusks valuable enough for her to purchase a castle. Even Austria's Kaiser Karl V used them to pay off national debt (Oliver Hoare Limited, 2021).

The Narwhal tusk trade demonstrates how the exploitation of existing belief systems and the maintenance of informational asymmetries can prevent direct observation of technological realities, allowing perception to supersede empirical evaluation. Contemporary society exhibits as a Big Tech's Messiah Savior Complex: a prevailing narrative that technology, particularly that advanced forms like AI, will single-handedly "save" humanity from its greatest challenges, whether those be climate change, health, longevity, poverty, or global inequality. This mindset treats technology as a kind of messianic guide, endowed with the power to deliver utopian outcomes, yet with little consideration for the complexities of human society, ethics, or unintended consequences. It reflects an overly optimistic, almost religious faith in what has been termed "technological solutionism," the conviction that every complex social problem has a technological fix (Morozov, 2013). This modern form of magical thinking manifests through motivated reasoning and cognitive biases that prioritize technological acceleration over careful evaluation of capabilities, limitations, and consequences.

Just as medieval European royalty invested enormous resources in narwhal tusks based on beliefs about magical properties rather than empirical evidence, contemporary society demonstrates remarkably similar patterns in AI investment and policymaking. Current AI discourse exhibits patterns remarkably similar to the narwhal-unicorn deception, where impressive demonstrations and projected capabilities allow audiences to extrapolate revolutionary potential while minimizing discussion of limitations, failures, or negative consequences. Often discourse is accentuated by anxieties that draw upon cultural tropes of technological determinism, and hyperstition[1] to articulate an affectively charged vision of the future. This messianic visioning subsequently serves a "sacred" cosmiconomic[2] moment,

[1] The term was coined by the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (CCRU) at the University of Warwick in the 1990s, particularly associated with theorists like Nick Land and Sadie Plant. Unlike regular fiction, hyperstitions don't just describe reality - they actively reshape it.

[2] In this papers context "cosmiconomic" thinking relates to the grandiose scale of claims about AI's transformative economic potential - promises that extend beyond earthly concerns to cosmic-scale transformation.

formalized in the powerful meta-collections of the Big Data apparatus of state surveillance.

However, the stakes have fundamentally changed in ways that make magical thinking and hyperstition exponentially more consequential than its historical predecessors. Medieval monarchs' faith in unicorn horns primarily affected individual rulers and their immediate circles, constraining the damage to royal treasuries and personal health decisions. Today's AI optimism operates on a civilizational scale, influencing trillion-dollar investments, reshaping entire industries, and directing national security policy. Where narwhal tusks could only disappoint individual buyers, AI systems deployed without adequate safeguards could reshape economic systems, democratic processes, and social structures. The cognitive biases and motivated reasoning that once led to misguided individual purchases now drive decisions that affect billions of people, making the consequences of magical thinking exponentially more significant for contemporary society.

2. HISTORICAL PARALLELS: UNICORN HORNS AND THE MESSIAH SAVIOR COMPLEX IN AI DISCOURSE

"The narwhal tusk has long been a source of fascination and myth, valued more for what it was believed to be than for what it truly was. " Heide-Jørgensen et al. (2015)

The historical trade in narwhal tusks, misrepresented as unicorn horns and revered for their supposed magical properties, serves as a fitting parallel for understanding contemporary attitudes toward artificial intelligence. Heide-Jørgensen et al. (2015) noted that narwhal tusks were “valued more for what [they were] believed to be than for what [they] truly [were],” illustrating how mythical thinking can override empirical understanding. Similarly, Big Tech’s Messiah Savior Complex reflects a belief system in which technological progress is framed as inherently redemptive and transformative. Industry leaders frequently describe AI not merely as a tool but as a force capable of solving humanity’s most intractable problems. For instance, Sundar Pichai, CEO of Google, stated that AI is "one of the most important things humanity is working on" and predicted it will be "more profound than electricity or fire" (as cited in Kharpal, 2018). This framing elevates AI to a status of near-divine intervention, promising salvation from suffering and systemic dysfunction.

This belief structure aligns closely with what Barbrook and Cameron (1996) termed the ‘Californian Ideology’, a synthesis of libertarian techno-utopianism and countercultural optimism. Central to this ideology is the notion that information technologies can deliver social emancipation, displace state control, and circumvent the slow processes of democratic reform. Within this worldview, AI is cast not as a socio-technical artifact requiring governance but as an autonomous agent of change. As Crawford (2021) argues, the anthropomorphization of AI systems plays a critical role in this narrative. By attributing human-like qualities to algorithms, companies obscure the fact that these systems are probabilistic statistical models dependent on human design, training data, and intent. This rhetorical move reinforces the illusion that AI possesses inherent intelligence and judgment, thereby legitimizing its authority while concealing its limitations and biases.

Industry resistance to regulation further illustrates the persistence of this magical thinking. When faced with proposals for oversight, technology executives often characterize regulation as a threat to innovation. Dr. Fei-Fei Li, widely regarded as a leading figure in AI development, stated in 2024 that "it is impossible for each AI developer, particularly budding coders and entrepreneurs, to predict every possible use of their model." (Li, 2024) While this acknowledgment recognizes the uncertainties inherent in AI deployment, it is frequently used to argue against responsibility and regulation. Yet this position is internally inconsistent. If developers cannot foresee how their systems will be used, then the justification for proactive oversight becomes more urgent, not less. The argument that unpredictability exempts developers from accountability directly mirrors the magical thinking of historical elites who believed unicorn horns could protect them from unseen dangers without critical evaluation.

The logical contradiction at the core of these industry positions underscores the extent to which faith, rather than evidence, continues to guide narratives about AI. Just as monarchs once invested in artifacts believed to confer mystical protection, today’s investors, developers, and policymakers risk accepting claims about AI’s benevolence without demanding empirical validation or enforceable safeguards. The anthropomorphization of AI, combined with a redemptive mythos, displaces meaningful public discourse about risk, power, and accountability. As AI systems grow in complexity and scale, the need to abandon these faith-based narratives in favor of transparent, democratic, and empirically grounded governance becomes a matter of transdisciplinary urgency.

3. MAGICAL THINKING AND STRATEGIC AVOIDANCE

"AI is not magic, but the mythology surrounding it makes it appear as such, often obscuring its actual capabilities and limitations." Noble (2018)

In ancient Greece, the bronze automaton and ‘unicorn’ Talos guarded the island of Crete and drew his power from a life force called ichor, sealed inside his body by a single bronze nail. According to Argonautica (Apollonius of Rhodes, 3rd century BCE), the removal of this nail caused the ichor to leak out, incapacitating the automaton. This myth offers more than fantastical imagery. It provides a framework for thinking about AI safety: powerful systems must include designed points of vulnerability, allowing external control in the event of malfunction or misuse. Just as Talos required a fail-safe to ensure he could be stopped, contemporary AI requires shutdown capabilities that serve as engineered constraints on autonomous operation.

Recent policy efforts have begun to ask for what the author coins as the Talos defense. The failed 2024 California AI Safety Act goal was that developers of powerful AI systems include “the capability to promptly enact a full shutdown” of their models (California Legislative Information, 2024). This principle reflects the recognition that systems capable of causing large-scale harm must be designed with non-negotiable safety valves. In AI safety literature, this principle is often described as corrigibility or ‘shutdownability.’ The myth of Talos reminds us that technological power must not outstrip control. Shutdown

mechanisms are not ancillary. They should be structural requirements embedded in the very logic of safe deployment.

Despite the clarity of the containment principle, the technology industry has resisted such mandates. Leading trade groups have framed proposals like mandatory shutdown capabilities as incompatible with innovation. For example, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce (2023) argued that these requirements would "undermine the risk-based approach that is essential for promoting the responsible development of AI" and would impose rigid, one-size-fits-all mandates. Similarly, Dr. Fei-Fei Li (2024) remarked that "it is impossible for each AI developer, particularly budding coders and entrepreneurs, to predict every possible use of their model." While her comment acknowledges uncertainty, it is often used to justify exemption from responsibility. This position contradicts its own premise: if developers cannot predict AI behavior, then external oversight becomes even more essential. Such statements exemplify a broader form of magical thinking, where AI is treated as an inherently beneficial force rather than a tool requiring limits and governance.

Crawford (2021) observes that this magical thinking is reinforced by anthropomorphizing AI systems. By framing statistical models as if they were autonomous agents, companies obscure the engineered and fallible nature of these systems. The result is a rhetorical landscape in which developers appear to delegate responsibility to the systems they build while downplaying the very real need for human control.

4. POLICY MANIFESTATION:THE 2025 EXECUTIVE ORDER

"Silicon Valley's faith in technology as the savior of humanity echoes ancient myths of divine intervention." Lanier (2013)

President Trump's January 2025 Executive Order titled "Removing Barriers to American Leadership in Artificial Intelligence," illustrates a strategic policy shift driven by the perceived urgency of securing national leadership in emerging technologies. The order instructs federal agencies to eliminate regulations identified as impediments to AI innovation, redirect resources away from certain safety research initiatives, and accelerate deployment timelines. Rather than codifying an anti-regulatory stance, the directive reflects a broader vision of AI development as essential to national prosperity and geopolitical positioning. The policy emphasizes global competition and includes language asserting the need to "solidify our position as the global leader in AI," highlighting a belief that innovation leadership confers both economic and strategic advantage. It also calls for the development of systems "free from ideological bias," embedding political priorities within technological objectives (White House, 2025).

The order's emphasis on "solidifying our position as the global leader in AI" reflects underlying assumptions about the relationship between technological advancement and national prosperity. This stance parallels medieval beliefs that possessing powerful artifacts conferred political legitimacy and authority. Similarly, the directive's goal of developing AI systems "free from ideological bias" functions not as a neutral technical criterion, but as an embedded policy stance that establishes boundaries for acceptable development. The directive also orders agencies to "revise or rescind all policies, directives, regulations, orders, and other actions taken under the Biden AI order," signaling an explicit reversal of prior governance approaches (American Civil Liberties Union, 2025). According to the ACLU, federal agencies have "followed the president's lead, scrubbing websites of AI guidelines, protections for jobseekers, and more," representing a systematic policy shift toward reduced regulatory oversight (American Civil Liberties Union, 2025).

Kania (2020) identifies this dynamic as part of the broader U.S.–China technological competition, where global leadership in AI is pursued as a strategic imperative rather than a shared global concern. Within this framing, safeguards such as shutdown mechanisms are seen not as essential infrastructure but as optional constraints that may weaken competitive advantage.

4.1 Consequences: Mythologized Thinking and Strategic Evasion

Resistance to Talos-style safety mechanisms demonstrates how magical thinking can become embedded within formal governance structures. Just as medieval courts declined to test the authenticity of unicorn horns in order to preserve their symbolic power, contemporary institutions often avoid rigorous evaluation of AI systems to maintain investor confidence and market momentum. With individual models costing over 100 million dollars to train, firms face substantial pressure to deploy quickly and avoid disclosing limitations that could slow adoption or invite scrutiny.

The result is a systematic bias toward optimistic assumptions and risk minimization, even when leading safety organizations warn that reliable shutdown remains an unsolved technical problem (Center for AI Safety, 2023). This dynamic echoes the logic of myth rather than the rigors of engineering. In the Talos myth, the bronze nail was not a weakness but a feature of responsible design. In modern AI governance, insisting on comparable fail-safes is not an act of pessimism but a recognition of complex, real-world consequences.

The narwhal, once exploited for its tusk under the guise of unicorn mythology, is in fact more scientifically fascinating than the myths it inspired. Similarly, AI systems, when examined critically, understood socially, and governed responsibly, are far more consequential than the mythologized narratives that promise salvation without risk. Current global policy approaches illustrate how particular assumptions about technological development become institutionalized when innovation acceleration is prioritized over extended evaluation processes. The presumption that regulatory oversight impedes beneficial technological progress reflects similar cognitive patterns that led medieval courts to avoid systematic investigation of unicorn horn properties. Just as questioning the beneficial properties of narwhal tusks threatened established economic and political arrangements, contemporary debates over AI safety research involve competing institutional interests and adversarial perspectives on technological progress.

4.2 Aschenbrenner's Situational Awareness: The Need for Vigilance

While President Trump's directive prioritizes reduced regulatory oversight based on assumptions about beneficial technological acceleration, Leopold Aschenbrenner's security-focused framework advocates for enhanced government involvement to

prevent catastrophic failure. Aschenbrenner's concept of situational awareness provides a crucial counterpoint to the patterns of technological optimism embedded in Big Tech's Messiah Savior Complex. Drawing from his experience at OpenAI, Aschenbrenner emphasizes that effective AI governance requires a comprehensive understanding of capabilities, competition, and security rather than reliance on presumptions about beneficial outcomes (Aschenbrenner, 2024).

His analysis reveals that American AI laboratories operate with what cybersecurity experts term "Swiss cheese" security, meaning multiple layers of protection with significant gaps that make it relatively easy for adversaries to steal crucial algorithmic breakthroughs (Aschenbrenner, 2024). This security vulnerability assessment directly contradicts assumptions that technological advancement inherently serves national interests. As Aschenbrenner observes, "When economic interests align with mythmaking, regulation becomes an uphill battle" (Aschenbrenner, 2023), highlighting how commercial incentives can obscure systematic risk evaluation. Aschenbrenner's concern extends beyond theoretical analysis. The National Security Commission on AI (NSCAI) concluded that the U.S. government must act urgently to protect its AI advantages from theft and espionage, as losing leadership in AI could be detrimental to national security (NSCAI, 2021). Aschenbrenner's call for "supersecurity," or government-level security measures, directly challenges assumptions underlying deregulatory approaches. He suggests that only with institutional support from organizations like the NSA can the United States adequately safeguard its algorithmic development (Aschenbrenner, 2024).

Aschenbrenner's analysis reveals how technological optimism can obscure critical vulnerabilities that require systematic attention. The parallels to medieval merchants protecting the lucrative narwhal tusk trade are instructive: just as Viking merchants had economic incentives to maintain secrecy about the true origins of "unicorn horns" while maximizing short-term profits, contemporary AI development faces similar tensions between commercial acceleration and longer-term security considerations. Without comprehensive situational awareness, policy frameworks risk underestimating the importance of safeguarding algorithmic advances while leaving systematic vulnerabilities unaddressed. This represents a form of collective blindness that parallels the cognitive patterns that sustained medieval myths about magical properties, where economic incentives discouraged empirical investigation of underlying realities. Aschenbrenner's emphasis on situational awareness points toward broader questions about how societies can develop systematic approaches to evaluating powerful technologies without falling into historical patterns of magical thinking.

5. IMPLICATIONS AND THE PATH BEYOND MAGICAL THINKING

"The trade in narwhal tusks was not a mere byproduct of Arctic exploration, but a deliberate and well-orchestrated enterprise designed to exploit the fascination with mythical unicorns." Chatterton (2018)

The historical narwhal tusk trade eventually ended not through market forces but through scientific investigation. Ole Worm's systematic examination of royal collections exposed the true nature of "unicorn horns," providing irrefutable evidence that undermined centuries of magical thinking (Cleveland Museum of Art, 2019). "Even after Ole Worm revealed the true source of unicorn horns, the allure of magical thinking persisted, a testament to the power of myth over fact" (Daston & Park, 2001). This historical precedent suggests that contemporary AI governance requires similar mechanisms for independent evaluation that can function despite the complexity of modern AI systems and the economic incentives that discourage transparent assessment.

Just as Worm's empirical investigation challenged established beliefs about unicorn horns, effective AI governance requires countering information pushes that perpetuate technological optimism. This involves creating institutional capabilities for sophisticated technical evaluation that can operate independently of commercial interests. Policy frameworks must address the informational asymmetries that enable magical thinking about technological capabilities. Instead of vague calls for transparency, this means implementing concrete measures such as mandatory third-party auditing for frontier models, a public registry for AI training runs exceeding a certain computational threshold and enforced incident reporting for failures and negative consequences. Such approaches are already being developed elsewhere; the European Union's AI Act, for example, establishes a risk-based framework with clear obligations for developers of high-risk systems (European Commission, 2021).

The concentration of AI development within private corporations raises fundamental questions about democratic oversight of technologies with civilizational implications. Edmund Burke's conception of society as a partnership "not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born" provides a framework for understanding these responsibilities (Burke, 1790). This perspective suggests that decisions about AI development should consider impacts on future generations rather than focusing on immediate commercial advantages or competitive positioning. The challenge involves balancing legitimate needs for innovation with equally legitimate requirements for democratic oversight and long-term stewardship.

Contemporary AI governance thus faces a choice between perpetuating patterns of magical thinking that have characterized powerful technologies throughout history or developing new institutional mechanisms capable of systematic evaluation despite economic and political pressures. The narwhal tusk precedent demonstrates that even deeply entrenched beliefs about technological properties can be overcome through persistent empirical investigation, but only when institutional frameworks support such inquiry over commercial interests.

6. CONCLUSION: BEYOND REASON - THE PERSISTENCE OF MAGICAL THINKING

"The unicorn symbolized immortality, power, and protection against poison; narwhal tusks were rare and highly sought after to adorn royal objects." University College London (2018)

The unicorn horn deception was not merely a case of medieval gullibility but a sophisticated system that leveraged cultural symbols and created powerful incentives to maintain the existing illusion. Similarly, today's AI narratives function as powerful mythologies that shape investment, policy, and public understanding. As Noble (2018) observed: "AI is not magic, but the mythology surrounding it makes it appear as such, often

obscuring its actual capabilities and limitations." Both cases demonstrate how uncritical acceptance of visionary rhetoric invites what Lanier (2013) warns against: "The danger is not that we will misunderstand technology, but that we will mythologize it." The critical difference between medieval unicorn horn beliefs and contemporary AI optimism lies in temporal scale and real-world consequences.

Current concentration of power among technology companies creates dynamics reminiscent of the Gilded Age, where 'Robber Barons' amassed enormous wealth and influence with little public accountability (Josephson, 1934). Today's tech giants function not merely as creators but as gatekeepers wielding immense influence over technologies that will shape global and domestic society for generations. The story of Ivan the Terrible calling for his narwhal horn staff on his deathbed serves as a cautionary tale about the persistence of magical thinking among even the most powerful leaders. Moving beyond this complex requires the same combination of empirical investigation, institutional reform, and cultural change that eventually exposed the narwhal tusk deception. As Sagan (1995) emphasized: "Skepticism is the antidote to magical thinking, whether in science or technology." We should approach sweeping promises about AI solving climate change, eliminating disease, or creating universal abundance with healthy skepticism, demanding evidence rather than accepting faith-based assurances. Zuboff (2019) warns that "Utopian narratives about AI often divert attention from pressing ethical and societal concerns."

What becomes clear in this transdisciplinary exploration is that effective governance requires bridging the silos between technical expertise, historical knowledge, ethical reasoning, and social science. As Max-Neef (2005) argues, "Transdisciplinarity transcends the boundaries of individual disciplines to generate new knowledge and solutions for complex societal challenges." This approach offers our best hope for developing nuanced governance frameworks that avoid both uncritical acceptance and reflexive rejection of powerful technologies.

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