

ARTICLE

Creation and compassion: What Frankenstein can teach us about AI

| OCT 30, 2025

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It's alive!

We are haunted this fall season by a new adaptation of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein once again returning to life on the big screen. There's a reason we endlessly reanimate Frankenstein's fearsome creature.

This embodiment of the original tech panic, replete with its frantic villagers marching with torches and pitchforks, has something urgent it needs to tell us as we grapple with a formidable, human-esque creation of our own making.

Is it *artificial*? Yes. Does it possess *intelligence*? Maybe. Powerful? Certainly. Disruptive? No doubt. Demanding of our moral wisdom, lest we humans be forced from our own loop?

Absolutely.

Modern Prometheus

It was 1818 and Shelley was just a 19-year-old – 19! – when she wrote *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*. At the time, the original story of Prometheus, the Titan who stole fire from the gods and was punished with eternal suffering for defying natural law in exchange for ambition, was a cautionary tale for the age.

When Frankenstein was written, the machinery of the first Industrial Revolution was churning with relentless momentum. Steam engines, reapers, cotton gins, and vast assembly lines of labor-saving devices were extending humanity's reach beyond its literal grasp and long before the ethical consequences of the rapid

evolution were calculated.

And while the teenager was writing of a scientist's efforts to artificially bring to life something that could approximate being human but clearly was not, real-life textile factory workers were taking sledgehammers to the mechanized looms that were replacing them.

They weren't anti-progress. They were anti-displacement, protesting a revolution that was replacing their skilled hands with cheap automation, replacing their humanity with efficient but soulless scaled mechanisms unchecked by humanity.

Sounds eerily familiar, n'est ce pas?

Creation and compassion

What happens when our own creations threaten to replace us?

"You are my creator, but I am your master; obey!" says the creature to Victor Frankenstein.

Frankenstein is considered the first science fiction novel and, like much great sci-fi since its publication, explores the moral gap between technological advances and responsibility, between creation and compassion.

The importance of human empathy and compassion in all aspects of technological creation is the novel's beating heart. It's Frankenstein refusal to engage with the great and terrible power of his own invention – that turns his creation into a monster. Invention without empathy dehumanizes both the creator and the creation.

We face that risk today.

"Make no mistake: What we are dealing with is a real mysterious creature, not a simple and predictable machine," said Anthropic co-founder Jack Clark about his own AI creation earlier this month.

"And like all the best fairytales, the creature is of our own creation. Only by acknowledging it as being real and by mastering our own fears do we even have a chance to understand it, make peace with it, and figure out a way to tame it and live together."

Compassion isn't an accessory to technology, but its conscience. It's what balances man and machine.

Modern healthcare

In healthcare, the stakes are enormous. It's hard to overstate the consequential disruption of AI. It can see patterns physicians can't, read scans in seconds, draft notes in a heartbeat, bring the world's medical knowledge to a small exam room in an instant. **It has the potential to be a great good.**

But it cannot do it alone. It should not do it alone. It can't be prompted into compassion.

AI can process but it cannot care. It can identify but it cannot comfort. It can read a chart but not a room. It can see images but cannot see a patient's fear. It can speak conversationally to the ear but not meaningfully to the heart. It can share information but not empathy. It can hold your attention but not your hand.

Healing at its very core is a human endeavor. It is part art. It is part science. Care is clinical, emotional, spiritual. To lose sight of this in our pursuit of efficiency, speed, productivity, and throughput risks falling out of our existential loop as to what it means to be human.

It is both interesting and, in the end, we would suggest, not unsurprising, that it is our healthcare leaders who are on the front lines facing the challenge of maintaining our humanity in the face of this new creation.

We are the humans in the loop. And being so is not a regulatory checkbox; it's a tightrope walk of supreme importance. Like Victor Frankenstein, if we forget the balance – or neglect the hard work it requires of us – we do so at our own peril.

"Nothing is so painful to the human mind as a great and sudden change," laments Victor Frankenstein as he reels from the calamity caused by his own creation.

He's talking to us, too. Let's attend carefully to those voices speaking to us from the beginning of the machine age.

We are in the embryonic days of AI's disruption. We decide now what creature we are stitching together on this laboratory table. Two centuries after Shelley's great admonishing tale, let us be discerning as we bring this powerful force to life.

Humans animate healthcare. Let's commit ourselves to keeping that alive.

This article is part of Healthcare Remix—a series of leadership articles that connect history and the arts with today's healthcare challenges and opportunities. [Click here to view all.](#)



About the authors

Ken Graboys, CEO of Chartis, began his journey not in an office, but in rural Africa, working in communities facing famine and limited access to care. It was there he saw how the foundations of health—food, medicine, compassion—could shape the trajectory of entire communities. In 2001, he co-founded Chartis with the mission to improve the delivery of healthcare in the world. His career path—from fieldwork in Mauritania to healthcare transformation—illustrates a commitment to cultivating healthier communities through thoughtful, sustainable action.

David Jarrard, Chairman of Jarrard, grew up in Oak Ridge, Tennessee—a town shaped by science and innovation. His early career as a journalist covering human stories gave him firsthand insight into how storytelling can influence public perception and drive change, which naturally connects to healthcare, a field where clear communication can impact patient outcomes and organizational success. This foundation led him to build one of the nation’s leading healthcare communications firms.

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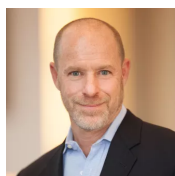
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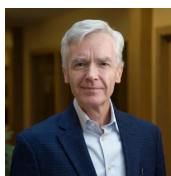
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