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Infinite Boredom: Generative AI as Template Culture

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II. p. 139, Chunk 1: Editorial: Physical AI

Chunk 1 Standardized practices and phenomena are integral to the field of generative AI, and this is particularly evident in the domain of generative imagery. To illustrate, the act of 'prompting' in AI systems is a process relying heavily on standardization in itself. Image generation is characterized by the possibility to select from a range of potential outcomes and the ability to repeat the process as often as desired. While this process is 'guided' by textual descriptions, it is based on a stochastic (random) process and the mathematical distance of text input and generated image inside a high-dimensional space that represents the text-image-relationships found in the training data. Text inputs can guide image generation but not precisely control it.[1]

Chunk 2 This results in efforts to structure the textual input in a reproducible manner, with the objective of increasing control and ultimately achieving more consistent outcomes. In their description of prompts as "a fixed linguistic template,"[2] researchers Maria-Teresa De Rosa Palmini and Laura Juliane Wager argue that prompts do not function as operative code, but rather "potentially [resemble] a coding syntax template."[3]

This is because prompts are optimized to be processed by computers, making use of punctuation (e.g., commas, parentheses) to structure information and categorize it, and utilizing signal words and adjectives to enhance clarity. Pre-defined parameters (e.g., aspect ratios, model versions, and levels of randomness or weirdness) often establish the technical and content framework for the generation process.[4] [5]

1: Wilde, L. R. A. (2023). Generative Imagery as Media Form and Research Field: Introduction to a New Paradigm. *IMAGE: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Image Sciences, 37(1),* 6–33. <https://doi.org/10.1453/1614-0885-1-2023-15446>

2: De Rosa Palmini, M.-T., & Wagner, L. J. (2024). Surface Aesthetics: The Secret Formula of Prompting. *Rrrreflect. Journal of Integrated Design Research, Special Issue*(1).

3: De Rosa Palmini, M.-T., & Wagner, L. J. (2024). Surface Aesthetics: The Secret Formula of Prompting. *Rrrreflect. Journal of Integrated Design Research, Special Issue*(1).

4: De Rosa Palmini, M.-T., & Wagner, L. J. (2024). Surface Aesthetics: The Secret Formula of Prompting. *Rrrreflect. Journal of Integrated Design Research, Special Issue*(1).

5: Midjourney. (n.d.). Parameter List. In *Midjourney Documentation*. Retrieved June 2, 2023, from <https://docs.midjourney.com/docs/parameter-list>

Chunk 3

It can be argued that the inability to precisely control the output of generative AI systems contributes to the homogenization of its outcomes. The systems encourage the use of templated practices, such as linguistic and structural patterns, in order to achieve the desired results. Thus everything looked 'trending on artstation' for some time.

This is not surprising, as Generative AI can be considered a continuation of generative computer graphics – a field that never focused on singular images but on "classes" of images, created from a common probability distribution.[6] [7] Accordingly, the artistic practice in the field has always consisted in defining probability distributions and curating their generated outcome. Unlike generative computer graphics, in Generative AI these probability distributions are extracted from training data. Because it historically can be seen as a reversal of classification, generation can be understood as reproducing classifiability, creating possible instances from learned classes.[8] These classes represent statistical norms in the training data[9] that, in turn, result from normalization and standardization processes in image culture. In this sense, while generative computer graphics produces what has been defined stochastically, Generative AI reproduces what has been standardized.

This introduces a new mode of reproduction, enabling the creation of new images through the application of visual effects, appearances, vibes, and aesthetics to existing and newly generated objects, compositions or entire scenes, including human subjects and real-life contexts, as noted by aesthetics scholar Emanuele Arielli.[10] It also integrates directly into platform culture, as it is the social media platforms of today where most generative media live, while recommendation algorithms provide standardized feeds by comparing the alignment of media content as data points.[11] [12] [13]

II. p. 121, Chunk 5: You Press the Button, They…
III. p. 203, Chunk 25: An Incredibly Average Face…
II. p. 122, Chunk 7: You Press the Button, They…

6: Offert, F. (2023). KI-basierte verfahren in der bildenden kunst. In S. Catani (Ed.), *Handbuch künstliche intelligenz und die künste* (pp. 202–216). De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110656978-012>

7: Nake, F. (2021). Über eine generative Ästhetik. In Jan Distelmeyer, Sophie Ehrmanntraut, & Boris Müller (Eds.), *Algorithmen & zeichen* (pp. 178–184). Kulturverlag Kadmos.

8: Scherffig, L., & Hawranke, T. (2024). Hund. Gassi gehen im latent space. In I. Bolinski, T. Hawranke, & S. Rieger (Eds.), *Virtuelle tiere*. transcript.

9: Steyerl, H. (2023). Mean images. *New Left Review, 140/141*. <https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii140/articles/hito-steyerl-mean-images>

10: Arielli, E. (2024). Chapter 6: Human Perception and The Artificial Gaze. In L. Manovich & E. Arielli (Eds.), *Artificial Aesthetics* (pp. 1–27). self-published.

11: James, R. (2021). Is a vibe the same thing as a style?: Plus some info on my updated subscription model [Substack newsletter]. In *its her factory newsletter*. <https://itsherfactory.substack.com/p/is-a-vibe-the-same-thing-as-a-style>

12: Chayka, K. (2023). A.I. Pop Culture Is Already Here: We're living in a world in which every style, every idea, and every possible remix can be generated as fast and frictionlessly as possible. *The New Yorker*. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/infinite-scroll/ai-pop-culture-is-already-here>

13: Meyer, R. (2023). Platform Realism is not an aesthetic of authenticity but of plausibility. Interestingly, plausibility and applause have the same origin: Plausible is that which deserves the applause and approval of an audience. AI images are optimized for plausibility – they aim for the broadest approval 1/4 [Tweet]. In *Bluesky Social*. <https://bsky.app/profile/bildoperationen.bsky.social/post/3kemyapegdt2y>

Chunk 4

Standardized Imagery

The growing role of templates, presets and defaults has been discussed in graphic design for at least two decades. Generative AI continues this trend of visual culture becoming "template culture,"[14] amplified by platforms. It relies on the standardization tendency inherent in visual culture and turns it into systems that can infinitely (re-)produce classes of standardized images. Because of this as well as the lack of control provided by prompting, generative imagery has become a field of standardized imagery and the newest expression of template culture.

With respect to image generation and computer vision in general, it can be stated that machines are trained to extract visual information from two-dimensional representations of a multidimensional physical reality. This is due to the fact that the majority of the training data used for training these systems are digital photographs. "This training process, however, is extremely limited compared to the multifaceted experiential training (lived through time with the input of collaborative sensory organs) that facilitate the functioning and processing of information by biological brains,"[15] as noted by scholar Amanda Wasielewski. The machine learning process is typically based on a single sensory input, resulting in machines perceiving "a flattened two-dimensional field in a photographic image"[16] without any perception or interpretation of this perception.[17]

In other words, learning visual features from pre-classified training data through a process that focuses on pixel-based visual features with no understanding and a lack of dimensionality and spatial experience results in a flattened version of the visual representation.

III. p. 191, Chunk 11: An Incredibly Average Face…
II. p. 122, Chunk 7: You Press the Button, They…
II. p. 121, Chunk 5: You Press the Button, They…

Chunk 5

Consequently, "the tie to three-dimensionality found in the photographs in the training data is effectively lost in the step from singular image datapoint to collective image data."[18] This presents a challenge to the notion of a 'realistic' representation of more complex objects in generative AI. In this context, the term 'realistic' can be understood as in accordance with our "perceptual expectations."[19] These expectations are much higher for well-defined objects or human subjects, such as hands or alphabetic characters, than for more abstract things, such as scenes of natural objects, where a certain range of variation is tolerated.[20]

Therefore, even the bizarre moments produced by generative AI, which do not align with our perceptual expectations, are becoming normalized.

14: Lorusso, S. (2023). *What design can`t do: Essays on design and disillusion*. Set Margins` Publications. p. 172

15: Wasielewski, A. (2024). DALL-E in Flatland: Illusion, Space, and AI-Generated Images. *Media Theory*, *8*(1), 185–204. <https://journalcontent.mediatheoryjournal.org/index.php/mt/article/view/1073> P. 190

16: Wasielewski, A. (2024). DALL-E in Flatland: Illusion, Space, and AI-Generated Images. *Media Theory*, *8*(1), 185–204. <https://journalcontent.mediatheoryjournal.org/index.php/mt/article/view/1073> P. 188

17: Wasielewski, A. (2024). DALL-E in Flatland: Illusion, Space, and AI-Generated Images. *Media Theory*, *8*(1), 185–204. <https://journalcontent.mediatheoryjournal.org/index.php/mt/article/view/1073>

18: Wasielewski, A. (2024). DALL-E in Flatland: Illusion, Space, and AI-Generated Images. *Media Theory*, *8*(1), 185–204. <https://journalcontent.mediatheoryjournal.org/index.php/mt/article/view/1073> P. 195

19: Arielli, E. (2024). Chapter 6: Human Perception and The Artificial Gaze. In L. Manovich & E. Arielli (Eds.), *Artificial Aesthetics* (pp. 1–27). self-published. P. 19

20: Arielli, E. (2024). Chapter 6: Human Perception and The Artificial Gaze. In L. Manovich & E. Arielli (Eds.), *Artificial Aesthetics* (pp. 1–27). self-published.

Chunk 6 As “realism”[21] becomes a mere standardized aesthetic feature, “normie weird”[22] is yet another example of a templated phenomenon in generative imagery.

Driven by Platforms

This phenomenon is driven by a platform economy, in which attention is the primary currency.

Chunk 7 In this context “factuality, originality, and style matter less than where and how content circulates and what kind of meaning its recipients can read (or hallucinate) into it.”[23] Within platforms, where an infinitive amount of content is available, the purpose of media shifts from being a finished piece, artwork, or product that communicates something to someone to being an initiator, driving force, or catalyst for transmitting non-verbal energies, such as vibes, which are both more easily scannable through their surface qualities and more suitable for us to project our own meaning into.[24]

A frequent observation among scholars and writers is that there is a common perception that people are no longer interested in actively reading and are more torn to more passive activities,[25] [26] such as “‘browsing,’ ‘skimming’ and ‘scanning’.”[27] “Users react to content without fully comprehending what the author is trying to convey, or comment and share before clicking the link.

Chunk 8 They take information (whether text- or image-based) out of context and editorialize it with unrelated narratives or even hallucinate associations into it that the author never intended.”[28]

As previously outlined in the prior issue of this publication,[29] this has led to a situation where all forms of creative practice are now grouped under the single concept of ‘content’ and distributed through platforms that prioritize quantity, speed, and memetic topics and media formats.

Chunk 9 Generative AI accelerates this situation as machines are fed with this ‘flattened’ media and generate similar output.

Chunk 10 As a result, media production is becoming increasingly commodified, which presents a challenge to aesthetic novelty and more meaningful forms of communication.

These developments have resulted in a transformation of the image as a medium. Rather than being considered an artifact, images are now

21: Meyer, R. (2023). With each update, tools like #Midjourney promise us more and more »realistic« representations – but the »reality« these images represent has little to do with the one we live in. Rather, they are best described as #PlatformRealism: A second-order aesthetic of generic images 1/9 https://t.co/7piJuQvA7S [Tweet]. In *Twitter*. <https://twitter.com/bildoperationen/status/1693505451080421641>

22: Lorusso, S. (2024). Deep-dreaming Willy Wonka: AI Weird as the New Kitsch. *Rrrreflect. Journal of Integrated Design Research, Special Issue*(1).

23: Busta, C. (2024). Hallucinating sense in the era of infinity-content. In *Document Journal*. <https://www.documentjournal.com/2024/05/technical-images-film01-angelicism-art-showtime-true-detective-shein/> n.p.

24: Busta, C. (2024). Hallucinating sense in the era of infinity-content. In *Document Journal*. <https://www.documentjournal.com/2024/05/technical-images-film01-angelicism-art-showtime-true-detective-shein/>

25: Busta, C. (2024). Hallucinating sense in the era of infinity-content. In *Document Journal*. <https://www.documentjournal.com/2024/05/technical-images-film01-angelicism-art-showtime-true-detective-shein/>

26: Zylinska, J. (2023). *The Perception Machine: Our Photographic Future between the Eye and AI*. The MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/14471.001.0001>

27: Zylinska, J. (2023). *The Perception Machine: Our Photographic Future between the Eye and AI*. The MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/14471.001.0001> P. 39

28: Busta, C. (2024). Hallucinating sense in the era of infinity-content. In *Document Journal*. <https://www.documentjournal.com/2024/05/technical-images-film01-angelicism-art-showtime-true-detective-shein/> n.p.

29: Grund, M. (2024). Algorithmic <strike>Culture</strike> Content. In *Unlearn AI, Ausgabe 1*.

30: Zylinska, J. (2023). *The Perception Machine: Our Photographic Future between the Eye and AI*. The MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/14471.001.0001>

I. p. 181, Chunk 1: Algorithmic ~~Culture~~…
I. p. 183, Chunk 6: Algorithmic ~~Culture~~…
I. p. 183, Chunk 7: Algorithmic ~~Culture~~…

predominantly experienced as ongoing sequences, or 'flows,' and as 'informational' (Zylinska), 'operational' (Farocki), and 'technical' (Flusser) parts of a global computational network.[30]

Though made for human consumption, generated images must be understood as an operational part of these flows, where their aligned and standardized aesthetics are more important than individual instances. What is perceived are visual templates: standardized compositions, textures, themes. As even the weird, failures and glitches of a flattened and statistically averaged reality become a norm, image culture turns into a field of infinite, slightly different plausible instances of what we have already seen.

Chunk 11

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I. p. 184, Chunk 8: Algorithmic ~~Culture~~…
II. p. 42, Chunk 19: The Cognitive Style of ChatGPT
I. p. 195, Chunk 10: Unpacking the Language of…