

HUMAN IS THE NEW VINYL

Human Creativity and the AI Revolution

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INTRODUCTION

Vinyl, Please

If you give me a heartfelt poem written by a ten-year-old kid from Michigan and a perfect sonnet written by an artificial intelligence (AI) model, I'll take Michigan every time. She's true. She's human. She has the experience of living, and her words mean something. Likewise, give me a dusty U2 record on vinyl and a digitally lossless audio version. I'll take vinyl every time. It's touchable. It's analog. It's an experiential connection.

The Year AI Got Famous

By the spring of 2023, AI had erupted onto the world scene with the force of a supernova through the release of ChatGPT (November 2022). It cast a dazzling light of possibility but also ominous shadows about the future. The "Chat" part of its name implies the conversation-style ease with which you can enter written instructions (prompts) through a simple text window. "GPT" stands for General Pre-trained Transformer, a robust computer algorithm taught to "think" by parsing and responding to natural language and predicting the best response.

ChatGPT immediately showed a considerable comprehension of advanced mathematics, science, medicine, and the law. It showed an astonishing ability to write human-level text across a broad swath of subjects, including philosophy and the liberal arts. This competence had swift and serious repercussions for education, technology, and content creation. Within two months of its launch, it surpassed over 100 million users, making it

one of the fastest-growing consumer applications in human history. Before ChatGPT, millions of users were already experimenting with text-to-image 'diffusion' models like DALL-E, Midjourney, and Stable Diffusion--programs that can generate photorealistic or multi-layered images from simple text-based prompts that continue to dissolve the borders between digital and material reality. At once, I assumed similar applications of these technologies would soon gatecrash music production, making it possible for artificial intelligence to generate astonishing music.

Our Growing Concern

In April 2023, my friend Brian and I hunkered down in a cafe in the Cleveland (TN) Public Library next to Lee University to enjoy some delicious wedge salads. We had just heard that Elon Musk, Steve Wozniak, and other tech leaders signed an open letter. They called for a six-month pause on developing powerful AI systems to allow for the implementation of safety protocols.¹

I had to stop walking when I heard the news to let it sink in. Wait. The "Hey, let's colonize Mars" guru and the co-founder of Apple say they want the world to tap the brakes on AI development for a minute? "What the hell is going on?!" I puzzled. One thing was evident. Icons like Wozniak and Musk saying such things are markers of fear and chaos from behind the curtain.

¹ Matt O'Brien and Michael Liedtke, "Musk, Experts Urge Pause on AI Systems, Citing 'Risks to Society'," *The Washington Post*, March 29, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2023/03/29/ai-experts-risks-open-letter>.

Don't Mess With my Levi's

On the heels of Wozniak and Musk's pleas for the AI moratorium, another controversy leaped into the scene. In March 2023, Levi Strauss and Company announced a partnership with the digital fashion studio Lalaland.ai. Their idea was to use AI-generated models in their online product photos, attempting to increase diversity and inclusion.²

The move was a disaster, triggering a backlash from consumers. It got me wondering why it was OK for artificial intelligence to improve phones and cars but not jeans. Was there something sacred about our denim we didn't want AI messing with? The actual issue wasn't about AI-designed jeans or jackets but the human touch in fashion and the potential impact on models' livelihoods.

Surprised, Levi's tried to walk it all back. Their clumsy response to the uproar underscores the challenges brands face when integrating artificial intelligence. While AI offers benefits like efficiency and experimentation, companies must also consider the value of human connection and the unintended consequences of replacing human talent with algorithms.³

I want to give Levi's some grace. They're a spirited, iconic American brand that stumbled while trying to innovate. However, their painful misstep is a cautionary tale for other companies adopting AI: balance innovation with authentic human

² Megan Graham, "Levi's Pauses Use of AI Models Following Backlash Over Diversity Concerns," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 15, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/levis-pauses-use-of-ai-models-following-backlash-over-diversity-concerns-2d4f6e1c>.

³ Thomai Serdari, "The Challenges of Integrating AI in the Fashion Industry," *Forbes*, March 22, 2023, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/thomaiserdari/2023/03/22/the-challenges-of-integrating-ai-in-the-fashion-industry>.

connection—it matters to customers. Levi's' blunder is just one early example of the complexities of AI integration, certainly not the last.

The VerifiedHuman™ Collective

As I thought about the scope and speed of artificial intelligence's sudden rise, a wave of concern for the future of creatives and educators began washing over me. At all hours of the night, questions tumbled around in my mind: *How will AI impact my friends who are authors, photographers, painters, sculptors, architects, songwriters, and musicians? What millions of jobs could automation supplant? How will teachers know if a student wrote a paper, poem, or essay or if AI wrote it? Can we tell what a human has created versus a machine? Will anyone care either way?*

In May 2023, I gathered a small group of friends—creatives, writers, visual artists, musicians, voice actors, filmmakers, philosophers, engineers, and human resources experts. Together, we formed a grass-roots movement called VerifiedHuman™.⁴ Our purpose was to plan and propose approaches to the problem of human-AI differentiation in created content. VerifiedHuman™ continues as an experiment to document our ideas and provide resources for creatives and educators.

We have discovered a painful reality. The differentiation problem—telling human work from AI work—is a hard problem to solve. We'll explore differentiation in a little more detail later. In the field of writing, AI detection software, like Grammarly's AI detector or even Originality.ai., which can, with some accuracy, root out AI writing from human

⁴ "VerifiedHuman." *VerifiedHuman*™, <https://www.verifiedhuman.info>.

writing, is equally matched with AI detection-evasion software, like Undetectable.ai, which can “humanize” AI writing with stealthy tactics.

What has resulted is an endless game of cat and mouse. It’s not unlike the 1980s movie *War Games* with Matthew Broderick, where a supercomputer plays itself in millions of unwinnable games of tic-tac-toe. In the field of visual arts, artificial intelligence can create lifelike images that are indistinguishable from human-created ones. For music, maybe the most complicated of the mediums, differentiation is even trickier because many songs comprise multiple, sometimes 20 or more layered tracks and parts, some produced by humans, some by physical instruments, some by synthesizers, some as prerecorded samples, and others still by generative AI.

We also lament that legislation has historically lagged way behind technology. Laws are slow to materialize, and when they finally do, they're often tangential to the situation on the ground or ignored altogether. Also, we know that strictures from above do not primarily motivate human adults. Their values do. People usually do what they think is right, sometimes do what they know is wrong, and almost always justify their actions if they're unsure.

As is the case, we find ourselves on a twisting journey of discovery, where we hold one position early and then go back and reevaluate, considering new, unfolding developments in the human-AI story. Our opinions about the definition of human-AI collaboration, the meaning of AI's impact on the fields we care about, and our ability to describe the nuances accurately—much less offer helpful solutions—are continually changing. What remains is a group of stubborn humanistic optimists. We have

tremendous faith in human adaptability, the stuff we have seen throughout history, even in light of extinction-level challenges. Humans are scrappy, and our collective story shows our unyielding resilience in the face of life-altering innovations.

The Swirling Chaos of Events

Putting this book together has been exciting and fun. But it has also been intense because relevant events unfold rapidly. While past innovations harden in historical concrete, today's situation is swirling, confusing, and uncertain. Writing about it is not unlike field reporting in unstable political regions. Events on the ground change quickly, and what they mean for the future is hard to understand.

The rate at which AI is developing and the media's various coverage represent a mammoth field to survey, filter, and analyze. In addition to recognized news outlets like the *Wall Street Journal*, *National Public Radio*, or the *New York Times* and magazines like *Wired*, *Fortune*, *Time*, and *Newsweek*—all with robust online presences—we also monitor tech blogs and e-news lists.

Every single day, we're devouring news about some new, often substantive development in the AI saga. I'll give you an example of a typical day of news and articles, not including any from the above sources. Today is February 27. Here is an abbreviated list of articles in my—just today's—email inbox:

“Building with AI 2024 - BrandX NYC Conference”

“Students and AI—The Impending Academic Epidemic”

"I said, 'Do not train on my content'—Did anyone listen?"

"The Danger of Deep Fakes and the Importance of Ethics"

"Amazing Collection of Chat GPT Prompts"

"Enabling Student Success in Higher Ed. with Adobe Express + Firefly"

AI Automates Google Employees"

"Why Open AI's Sora is About More Than AI Videos"

These articles proclaim artificial intelligence's power and raise alarm about its global impact. They offer commentary about deepfakes—phony but stunningly realistic voice, image, or video representations of actual people or events. They discuss privacy and ethics, the AI-academic crisis, job loss, and the rise of text-to-motion pictures, all stories with implications touching millions of humans. And that was before 10 a.m. It is a hot mess of fascinating information. New artificial intelligence developments will emerge before you read this sentence. But you have my commitment: I will do my best to add the latest essential developments until the very last second this manuscript leaves my hands.

Perspectives

Concerning my perspective, I'd like to submit something for you, the reader, to consider. Our experiences, countries of origin, upbringing, and many other factors shape our viewpoints. The specificity of my frame of reference has become abundantly clear to me in this project, especially when researching and writing about history, the arts, and technology. As my American context may limit my perspective, some readers could feel I fail to represent legitimate contributions from other regions.

For instance, a few weeks ago, I learned the Chinese were the first to invent modern paper and mass printing with movable type—several hundred years before the

"invention" of the Gutenberg printing press in Germany. Most of the West wasn't aware of this because Chinese printing eluded the interests of European merchants, who traded in other resources rather than the written kind. Also, most of the world couldn't read, much less Chinese.

Another issue may be attribution. I usually rely on prevailing opinions from research, knowing that "prevailing" doesn't mean "most correct." It just means prevailing. For example, I have bantered with my Brazilian best friend about whether the American Wright Brothers or Brazilian Alberto Santos-Dumont should get credit as the "first in flight." In this book, I may give one inventor or artist "props" when another one of another time, location, or gender is more deserving. If you find this misattribution true, I hope you understand it isn't intentional. I've quickly discovered the folly of trying to fit "life, the universe, and everything" into one volume, especially considering the soaring interest in AI.

As a half-Chinese-Thai, half-American writer born in Bangkok and raised in the U.S., Thailand, and the Philippines, my unique experiences and cultural background shape my perspective. I was educated at a liberal arts college and steeped in global philosophical studies, so my academic journey has further influenced my worldview. I try to be sensitive to diverse audiences, but my identity as a multinational American male inevitably influences my lens. I see and write through that lens. It's the only lens I've got.

I've held strong convictions on various issues in various stages of my life, only to change—even reverse—my stance after years of back-and-forth with friends from all

walks of life. My friends maintain a wide range of worldviews. We might clash fiercely on many issues, but we approach our differences with open minds, seeking understanding and valuing friendship over consensus.

I mention perspective because transparency about my background and potential biases matters, especially when tackling global topics like creativity, technology, and artificial intelligence. I have tried to present a balanced, accessible perspective while acknowledging the limitations of my experiences and the challenges of covering such an expansive subject. I have likely needed to be more sensitive to someone's culture, values, and guiding beliefs. If so, I hope it isn't you.

Revolutions

Our heads spin, our clocks spin, our wheels spin, our planet spins, and the moon, its faithful dance partner, mirrors in lock-step synchrony. Our earth revolves around the sun, our solar system around the galaxy, and it just keeps going like that. Physically, a revolution is simply a rotation, a complete turn. Revolutions surround us. Civil revolutions have a distinctive sound—masses assembled and boiling, law enforcement megaphones pleading for order, crowds shuffling their feet, chanting in unison, voicing collective outrage and hope. In this way, revolution sounds like a coup d'état, the forcible overthrow of a government.

Vinyl records also have a revolutionary sound. They spin in revolutions per minute, or RPM. In the broad creative world, revolutions are more than rotations of a vinyl disk or whimsical shifts in style. Revolutions represent the introductions of entirely new

modalities of expression, redefining the relationship between the creator and their work. They reimagine how audiences engage with what they see, hear, and experience.

This book highlights two particular revolutions in recent history that are strikingly parallel—(1) the rise of digital music from its analog roots and (2) the rise of generative AI in the creative fields. Both revolutions have caused a ruckus. The digital revolution transformed the music industry, redefining how everyone produces, distributes, and consumes music. The artificial intelligence revolution is disrupting almost every industry and field on the planet.

In this book, we will together discover how AI's rise is revolutionizing five fields: (1) the field of writing—of all kinds for all purposes; (2) the field of visual arts, including photography, moving images, and all forms of visual design; (3) the field of music (4) the field of voice-acting—a more pervasive sector than most people realize; and (5) the field of education—where students learn how to create writing, art, music, and technology, and how to be responsible humans. We'll examine how these fields have developed over time and become integral to our lives.

I apologize to historians, specifically technology, art, music, and cultural historians. I am not a scholar or historian. I am a hopeless generalist, deeply curious about almost everything. My apology is this. In one book, surveying innovation in multiple fields might seem ambitious. I intend it to be purposeful—to establish how inventive, resourceful, and adaptable humans have been in their pursuit of creativity. The historical glimpses express hope for the future by showing how well humans have

adapted, survived, and even flourished when faced with the unintended consequences of innovation.

Artificial intelligence's trajectory in human history is both an opportunity and a risk. It has the potential to help people in countless ways. But beyond the doomsday prophecies, AI poses a more immediate threat—the risk of obscuring human value. This threat is precisely why we established VerifiedHuman™. We recognized the need for a space to celebrate human creativity in a world fixated on artificial intelligence.

VerifiedHuman™ has no PR or marketing budget and has not received venture capital cash or investments. But we are driven by an unshakable mission: To preserve the authenticity of human-created work in an AI world by offering a transparent, values-based model rooted in human trust. Monetarily speaking, we may not sit on the "opportunities" side of the artificial intelligence market, but we are situated firmly and happily on the "human" side.

The Two Differentiation Problems

Today, it is often impossible to distinguish between human-created and AI-generated content, whether it's a poem, a paper, an image, a song, or even a voice. You might be unable to tell if you're seeing an AI-generated image or video. Even more alarming, you could be hearing an AI-synthesized voice on your phone instead of an actual friend or family member. These problems raise two primary issues: (1) endangering the distinctiveness of human creativity and expression and (2) threatening the potential for deception and misinformation. Many writers have raised the differentiation problems implicitly, as in discussions about deepfakes. However, the differentiation problems

have not been well-articulated in the broader AI discourse. Maybe differentiation problems aren't as sexy as doomsday prophecies.

The first part of the problem involves artificial intelligence making things that humans make. As AI advances, telling the difference between human-made and AI-generated content across various media, including text, images, audio, and video, is becoming increasingly difficult, if not impossible. While this may not end the world, it could signal the end of human distinctiveness in creative fields. That's what this book is about—this part of the differentiation problem for creators.

The second part of the problem concerns AI "pretending" to be human. By creating deepfake videos, synthetic audio, writing, and other media, artificial intelligence can portray people saying or doing things they never said or did. The potential for human deception is staggering. Although this book isn't about deception or misinformation per se, it would be irresponsible not to call attention to this problem and its enormous potential consequences.

Houston, We Have A Problem

As we continued our wedge salads, I told Brian I am a big fan of Jeremy Cowart, a celebrated Nashville portrait photographer. Alongside Cowart's now famous portraits of the Kardashians, Tim Tebow, and Taylor Swift, he has done projects for the *Discovery Channel* and *People Magazine* and humanitarian passion work for the United Nations. In a March 2023 email to his news list, Cowart described with dismay being unable to

tell the difference between photographs produced by AI and actual photos of real people taken by real people.⁵

This development in Cowart's career and our world's reality was, to put it lightly, alarming. Jeremy Cowart is a seasoned pro who's meticulously taken, developed, and scrutinized countless human portraits. If he can no longer tell a human photo from an artificial intelligence image, who can? Houston, we have a problem, indeed.

By the end of lunch, Brian and I had arrived at a couple of conclusions. He speculated, "Micah, I think we're going to be at a point soon where it will be nearly impossible to distinguish between anything human and AI, whether it's writing, visual arts, film, music, motion graphics, whatever."

My brow furrowed as I gazed into a future where human and AI creations were so entangled that it would be hopeless to distinguish them. I imagined a world where generative use of AI became so widespread that everyone would—by default—assume AI must indeed have played a significant role in its creation.

I responded bleakly, "I think you're right. What's more, I think a day is coming when the automatic assumption will be, 'AI probably made this unless you can prove a human did it.'" It seemed plausible, possible, and almost inevitable.

Human is the New Vinyl

An extended metaphor supports the arch of this book. The "human" part refers to the personal perspectives, individuality, and creative intelligence humans bring to creative

⁵ Jeremy Cowart, "Houston, we have a problem," Email newsletter, March 2023.

work, just as a human artist crafts a unique piece for her audience. I juxtapose the heart of human creativity with AI's vast, nearly boundless computational might.

The "vinyl" part of the metaphor refers to the resurgence of the popularity of vinyl records worldwide in the past twenty years, an era almost entirely dominated by digital music. Why has vinyl made such a remarkable comeback despite all the odds? Isn't digital superior? Digital delivers greater convenience, portability, durability, and access to inexhaustible music libraries. True.

But vinyl has something else—something at the heart of its appeal, something digital does not. It's deeply connected to musical history and culture. Records are works of art, uniquely crafted and lovably imperfect. Vinyl is tangible, tactile, and visceral. People hold it in their hands, study the cover, read the lyrics, drop the needle, turn the knobs, and flip the record over for what's next.

Vinyl's revival was a reaction to digital—even a rebellion—driven by the human gravitation toward authenticity, tactile experiences, and nostalgia. It didn't surprise me when I read that 'Authenticity' was *Merriam-Webster's* word of the year in 2023. The desire for authenticity and the human touch goes far beyond music.

In an age of mass production and technological automation, there is still a great appreciation for the value of human craftsmanship. Take, for example, the enduring legacy of Hatch Show Print, a traditional letterpress print shop in Nashville since 1879. Their hand-printed posters are old-world beauties. Comparably, the design world celebrates artists like Jessica Hische and Stefan Sagmeister for the human touch in their hand-lettering and graphic design, which adds endearing imperfections to their work.

AI's explosive growth has also encouraged an atmosphere thick with hyperproduction, uber efficiency, and the ability to generate vast quantities of work quickly. Artificial intelligence flourishes in a world hurtling towards quicker, cheaper content generation for the masses. It has emerged as a new revolution in the human story, reshaping our relationship with all forms of creative expression.

As vinyl yielded to digital, human creations must make room for AI's presence. This shift goes beyond our creative tools and mediums. It demands a cultural and existential metamorphosis. We're just starting to glimpse AI's emerging cultural and philosophical identity, and its influence will only grow. But we don't have to be mindlessly and ignorantly swept along. Revolutions are beautiful because they let us recall our journey, recover what we've lost, and redefine what matters.

Digital nearly killed out analog. Digital music's reign *almost* killed vinyl. But something authentic, organic, and scrappy in vinyl allowed it to survive and thrive again. With its dust, scratches, and wonky grooves, vinyl isn't just another medium for sound vibrations. It's a symbolic medium full of stories, memories, and a tangible connection to the music. Now, AI's generative superpowers loom larger than life, threatening to obscure human contribution. Like vinyl, there is also something authentic, organic, and scrappy in the human spirit. Human-created work bears the imprimatur of its creator, her personal perspectives, his real-life experiences, and their unique stories. As artificial intelligence advances at breakneck speed, vinyl's comeback gives us hope. Vinyl reaffirmed its value in a digital world, and so will humans in the age of artificial intelligence.

People Win

We don't see the human-AI dilemma as a *contest* but a *confluence* in which the more important party wins. Humans can use machines to benefit human flourishing.

Machines can assist their architects and, hopefully, to benevolent ends. We invite you to join us in advocating for human creativity in the face of technology's relentless march.

We must consider relevant questions to prepare for what is already here and what is to come. How can artificial intelligence and machine learning improve our lives without compromising the essence of what makes us human? Can we make technological progress while still preserving our unique human identity? Let's work together to find the answers, not so machines lose, but so people win.

"The human spirit must prevail over technology."⁶—Albert Einstein.

⁶ Albert Einstein, as quoted in *Einstein and the Poet: In Search of the Cosmic Man* by William Hermanns (Brookline Village, MA: Branden Press, 1983), 65.