

25#04

Collide

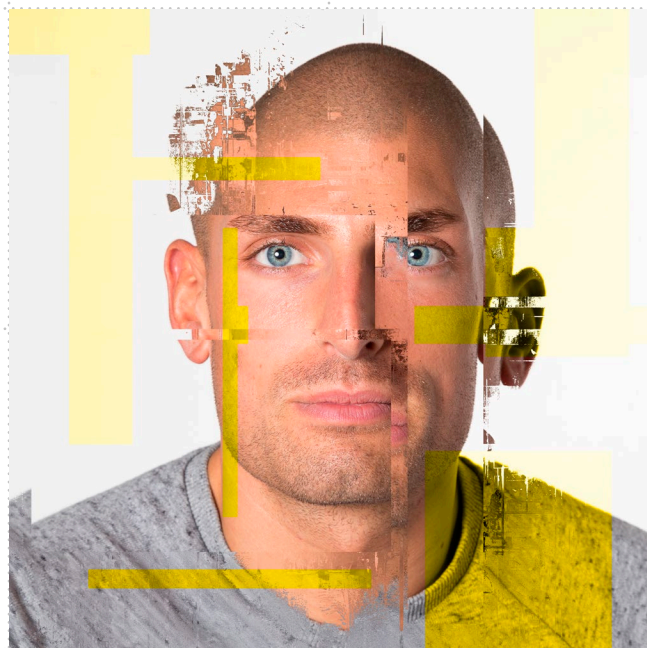
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provocation come together

Independent thinking by
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Welcome to Collide.



Jonathan Rhodes
Co-Director, Linney Create

The rise of AI can feel relentless and inevitable. August's launch of ChatGPT-5 promised "significant advances in reducing hallucinations, improving instruction following, and minimizing sycophancy". Reassuring and disturbing in equal measure.

In this Collide, we explore how AI is already shaping the way we work and the way we buy.

How does it feel when our human craft and creativity is in danger of being handed over to a machine? Two of our creative professionals share their very different experiences. And how is the integration of AI into retail affecting search, social and the art of beekeeping?

Meanwhile, if the future feels too close for comfort, we've been pottering round the garden centre thinking about brands and algorithms.

Wishing you a month of reduced hallucinations.

This issue

01 — Control. Create. Repeat.

02 — Chained to the algorithm

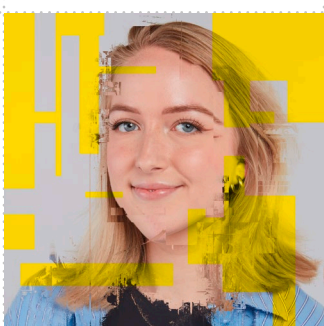
COLLIDE CONVERSATIONS:

03 — Unsuccessfully farming bees

Author



Lucy Johnson
Graphic
Designer



Sophie Baker
Creative
Copywriter



Control. *Create.* Repeat.

AI promises to protect us from the ‘indignity’ of labour and busywork. But when creative professionals work with generative AI, are they writing their creative epitaph or drawing on new tools? Illustrator *Lucy Johnson* and writer *Sophie Baker* explore how it feels when the robots are after your pay cheque.



#01



*AI took care of the prescriptive
churn quickly and... adequately.
It didn't work with imagination
— how could it?*

LUCY ON ILLUSTRATION

The first time I used Midjourney, I thought I'd have to put away my pencil case. It spat out a watercolour image that I had prompted five seconds before, and it looked like an authentic painting, down to the textured brushwork and stylised perspective.

I'm a designer by profession and an illustrator by choice. I love to see my work appear in the wild, on food packaging and on restaurant Christmas cups. But it's the challenge and the craft that brings me the most joy.

Yet fast forward a few months – I was asked to create some straightforward watercolour renderings of everyday objects. The kind of thing that AI can generate in a few seconds. And did.

AI took care of the prescriptive churn quickly and... adequately. It didn't work with imagination – how could it? – but the time it saved let me put more energy into the conceptual part of the project, the ideation, storytelling, abstraction and experimentation. The finished work was all the better for it.

All tooled up

AI helps me up my game and produce my best work. It buys me more playtime, and playtime is the number one factor that lets my creativity flow. It allows happy accidents, those visual discoveries that only come when you have time to take risks. With AI taking care of the routine, there's room for other ideas to thrive, with more time and without repetitive demands cramping my style.

For me, generative AI is an amazing creative springboard, a studio assistant that lets me select and refine through a human lens, considering a host of brand, contextual and legal considerations and constraints.

It's a shift in process we all have to get used to. I'm still an illustrator, never an imaging director or prompt

engineer, but the tools I use have changed. Artists, designers and illustrators have referenced others' work since the dawn of civilisation. And though there are still legal and IP challenges to be settled, it's here and it will only get better. So, how do we make sure that a human creative voice is still going into the work?

Authentically human

After all, as humans, we want to connect with other humans. The only way to cut through the uncanny valley of AI-generated noise around us is to highlight the joyful parts of the creative process that result in true authenticity.

Generative AI works by duplicating existing patterns that correspond to the prompt that it receives. Blending its catalogue of millions of cottages and trees and roads and clouds. That's not how I create.

If I see a scene I want to paint, the mental prompts I give myself are narrative and human.

Who lived in this medieval cottage over the centuries? What romantic letters are contained in this red Victorian pillar box consumed by entwined red roses? Why has this lawn only been mowed on one side? Did the neighbours fall out – “They've not done our bloody side again!”

Adding narrative and personal reflections into my illustrations is how I add human authenticity, as well as embracing wonky lines and the imperfect nature of hand drawing.

The challenge to me is to harness AI in a way that supercharges my creative process. I don't want to be replaced, so I'll focus more on the things that make me irreplaceable. The tasks that develop my creative voice and make me authentically me. They are still the things that bring me joy.



SOPHIE ON COPYWRITING

Every time I open LinkedIn I'm greeted by a new post from a self-styled "AI expert" heralding the death of copywriting. I'm told that "it's only a matter of time" and that I should "upskill or die".

A recent op-ed in *The New York Times* even said: "Right now, [AI] performs like a highly competent copywriter, infusing all of its outputs with a kind of corny, consumerist optimism that is hard to eradicate."

It's not making me feel very cheery.

When ChatGPT was first released in November 2022, I was reassuringly underwhelmed by the writing quality. No matter how detailed my prompt, the content generated was usually flat, clichéd and derivative. Trying to wrangle a passable output felt like gentle parenting an overeager assistant who needed painfully detailed, step-by-step instructions that took more effort to explain than simply doing the work myself.

But AI moves fast. Since 2022, OpenAI has released five new "coding models" – each marketed like Apple's iOS updates, with flashy new features designed to supercharge and optimise and elevate and... you get the picture. The latest, GPT-5, "[...] is our most capable writing collaborator yet".

That claim is not far from the truth. Today, most large language models (LLMs) can produce clear and competent prose that's grammatically and stylistically correct, reads OK and could (on a superficial level) answer your average copy brief.

There's a separate debate to be had over what constitutes good writing. But most word nerds worth their salt know that a sure-fire way to delight readers is to break the rules. To seek out unexpected connections between ideas. To turn that phrase on its head and put that word where it doesn't belong.

Is there a 'write' way to use AI? For me, it's sparingly – and mindfully. That might not protect me from eventually being replaced.

AI can't do that because it's essentially a sophisticated autocomplete tool. It's predictable by design. Emily M Bender, a linguistics professor at the University of Washington, describes LLMs as "stochastic parrots". She argues that they can only mimic human content, without understanding meaning. So what? ChatGPT has been trained on thousands of sources, many of which are rife with misinformation and bias. If what Bender claims is true, ChatGPT can't interrogate what's true, ethical and even lawful. I don't need to explain the impact that could have.

Machine yearning

I've wrestled with the urge to outsource tough tasks to AI. When I'm staring, paralysed, at a blank page and a flickering cursor, trying to extract a single, competent thought can feel like drawing blood from a stone. But wait! Here's a tool that can save me from all that time-wasting and soul-searching. And yet...

Writing is thinking. It's not just about cobbling words together in the right order. I tend to chafe at the claim that AI will help me work smarter and free up my time to focus on "real" creative tasks. Every headline, brochure, article and script I've laboured over – even

stuff considered 'grunt work' – has strengthened my capacity for creativity. And that's a skill that matters more than ever if I want to keep crafting weird, wonderful, authentic, boundary-pushing work that'll stand out in a sea of unoriginal, AI-generated slop.

When I choose to walk somewhere, it's not always because it's the most efficient way of reaching my destination. It's not always enjoyable; sometimes it's cold or wet or my shoes hurt, and I wish I'd just driven. But it's good for my health, and sometimes I'll stumble upon a route I've never explored before, or a beautiful view, or a hole-in-the-wall café that looks shabby but serves great coffee.

The hard work involved with writing doesn't keep me from new ideas – in itself, it's the exact process I need to discover them.

You and AI

AI is new and fascinating and disruptive and terrifying. Despite my reservations, I'm genuinely intrigued to see how it'll reshape how we live, learn, work and play. But we shouldn't let our excitement cloud our scrutiny. AI requires vast, power-hungry data centres to run smoothly – that means more emissions and less natural land. It's been trained on unlicensed and copyrighted content. It's known to hallucinate data and facts.

Is there a "write" way to use AI? For me, it's sparingly – and mindfully. That might not protect me from eventually being replaced. But if AI ever does do creativity better than humans, then my biggest concern won't be whether it can write ads. In the meantime, I'll make sure to mind my Ps and Qs on all prompts, so when our robot overlords do take over, I might have a fighting chance.

Author



Mike Cook
Brand Strategy

Chained *to the* algorithm

Mike Cook explores how YouTube
and the garden centre make us
comfortable living in our bubbles.



#02



Ofcom reports that televisions, not smartphones, still dominate home viewing, with 84% of video content watched on bigger screens...

We all know you can't hide from the algorithm. The algorithm will always get you.

Linger too long on TikTok or Reels. Pick a show on Netflix or a song on Spotify. It will study your taste and serve you a copy, then offer you copies of the copies of what you liked before. The algorithm knows you better than you know yourself.

It's a long way from the shared cultural experiences of the past, when families gathered to watch the same sitcoms at the same time on the same TV in a corner of the room.

Now, the algorithm is invading our TVs. Ofcom reports that televisions, not smartphones, still dominate home viewing, with 84% of video content watched on bigger screens; and as much as 34% of the time spent watching YouTube at home is on TV.

My own YouTube rabbit holes are not really anything my family want to gather around.

I can't remember exactly why I clicked on my first "culture shock" video. To me, a culture shock is a major schism between belief systems. Maybe I was in the mood for a video essay reflecting on individualism versus collectivism or the status of religion in public discourse. These are not that.

These are "Ten Culture Shocks I wish I knew before moving to England", "Californians riding the tube for the first time", "Things in British apartments that are weird to Americans" and "The weird UK food combos that just make sense."

Culture shocks according to American YouTubers are not quite at the level of "they drive on the left and call potato chips crisps", but they're not a million miles away. We don't always have tumble driers or mixer taps. Meal deals are great. People use buses. That kind of thing.

But I find them compelling. Looking at UK life from a new perspective. And the characters delivering this

content are part of the charm. These Temu Bill Brysons have an optimism and a perspective about living here that isn't always shared by the rest of us.

There is Kjordy, the beaming street interviewer, both gently bemused and enthused by London and, increasingly, The North.

There is Kalani Ghost Hunter, the Stetson-wearing Hawaiian rating Greggs' steak bakes and full English breakfasts.

And perhaps my favourite, a woman I know only as "Texan retiree at a British garden centre". This is, as far as I know, a one-off video. A joyous 60-something in athleisure turning every corner with a tear of joy in her eye. Marvelling at the variety and value amongst the shrubs and the houseplants.



But then who doesn't love a garden centre?

The Blue Diamond near to me is 81,000 square feet of home and garden superstore, a flagship of the £5bn sector.

Outside, there are plants. There are sheds. There are hot tubs. But it's inside that the magic really happens. It's like a 21st-century Woolworths, if Woolworths was massive and the pick and mix had been replaced by a never-ending range of oddly branded pickles and sauces. By the door, framed artworks of Del Boy and *Dad's Army*. Here, the sitcom favourites have escaped from TV, been lovingly rendered in pencil and are now selling for £70 a pop.

This is a place where the normal rules of brand familiarity don't seem to apply. A parallel world of commerce where what's on trend isn't shaped by Gen Z influencers or city-centre brand activations. Homewares. Fashion. Furniture. Shoes. Occasionally, a familiar name appears. A COOK concession – the frozen ready meal business more often found near upmarket Home Counties commuter stations, but here doing a roaring trade.

In my part of England, our empty high streets are still haunted the spectres of Covid and Amazon Prime. So this bustling retail centre is an anomaly. Is this where provincial department stores went when Debenhams died? Into this single-storey shopping barn, the size of a small John Lewis, powered by the grey pound and its copper-plated pensions?

A visit to the garden centre is a gentle reminder that we are comfortable living in a bubble. It might not quite be a culture clash, but it's at least a culture bump.

Because this is clearly not the high street. There are no broken paving slabs. No overflowing bins. No one asking for change near a cash machine.

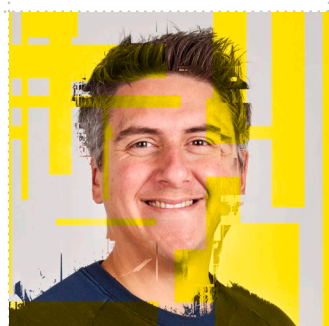
It's not even the fake urban environment of the out-of-town shopping mall. We are undeniably out in the country. You need to drive from almost anywhere (there's free parking right outside). People can't use buses here.

Now, you might be very familiar with a garden centre. You might love a garden centre. You might find a garden centre unremarkable. Buy your clothes and chairs and giant cookies from the garden centre.

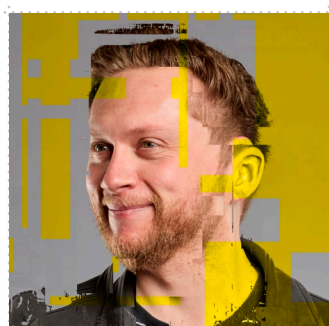
But that's my point. Like our personalised YouTube experiences, there are now everyday parts of our culture that some of us never get to see. When we no longer share the same high streets, we no longer share a common retail experience.

A visit to the garden centre is a gentle reminder that we are comfortable living in a bubble. It might not quite be a culture clash, but it's at least a culture bump. We are being forced apart by the algorithms of our lives.





Alex Smith
*Creative Account
Director*



Ben Meakin
*Head of
Performance
and Social*

COLLIDE
CONVERSATIONS:

Unsuccessfully *farming bees*

For years, trends forecasters have been predicting the slow death of bricks-and-mortar retail. After Covid, Amazon and TikTok Shop, the latest potential threat is shopping via AI. But does it represent a fundamental shift in behaviour or just another step on the way on to a frictionless future? *Ben Meakin* and *Alex Smith* chatted over the practical and the principles with Collide.





It's already much harder to make an impulse buy in a big online shop. I'll happily pop a bag of some new chocolate pretzels into my real Tesco basket.

#03

BM: Telling an AI to do your weekly shop when it knows the things that you've cooked before and the things that you like and the state of your health and your income and the size of your family...

If it can weave that into ordering just what you need to cook nutritious, but quick, batch meals for families who are short on budget, it could be a real change in how we shop.

AS: That sounds utopian.

BM: The future doesn't have to be *Black Mirror!*

AS: I think it's a huge change from a brand's point of view. There are so many emotional and sensory moments that happen in a retail environment that you would completely skip.

It's already much harder to make an impulse buy in a big online shop. I'll happily pop a bag of some new chocolate pretzels into my real Tesco basket. But if I'm not there to see them...

BM: We already prompt that behaviour online with in-app ads or promos.

AS: But there will be loads of opportunities that you'll miss by taking that human element out of the buying experience completely.

COLLIDE: We're suddenly marketing to a new audience. As a new product developer, how do I get AI to notice me?

BM: This is why the death of the website has been greatly exaggerated. You need to publish your product in the usual places – supermarket websites and food blogs and through TikTok and Instagram. And that becomes your GEO, the idea of generative engine optimisation or effectively how we do search engine optimisation for AI bots.

Citations are still really important, which in turn kind of makes PR really important again, and so you would make sure that your pretzels are being seen and being eaten by real humans. Genuine human recommendation is still the best.

AS: Of course you'll have to pay someone good money for genuine human recommendation!





BM: I think what's harder is – how much does an AI need to understand you in order to know that you're going to want those pretzels? What's prompting the AI?

AS: It's that balance of how much autonomy we want to give to it. Do we let it decide all our wants for us or is it going to keep bugging us with questions?

BM: You're not giving away your autonomy.

AS: At the extreme, you're delegating your entire personality to the AI – it gradually learns more and more what you like and don't like. It's your Nectar card data, times... a billion! You're reducing your persona to data.

BM: I don't see a problem.

AS: It has so many implications.

BM: I think that battle is lost. Clubcard and Nectar and Google Maps have always been interested in everything you're doing. And from a performance perspective, we're always here for it. And it'd be interesting to know if younger generations even notice it as a thing.

AS: I think the wider public are still suspicious. And AI changes the rules of the game even further.

BM: I think there can be a misinterpretation of what data is. Your "personal data" gets bucketed into a big scary concept, but that's just the stuff that allows the likes of us to do highly targeted advertisements. The fact that Experian knows that you've bought two cars in the past five years. Yes, it's a personal data point but... so what?

COLLIDE: Lots of people already believe their phone is listening to them.

BM: But I think most people are more bothered about somebody hacking their bank account or their email address, or stealing their passport, than their shopping behaviour.

AS: Except over the whole course of history, people have rebelled against being monitored and controlled. Whenever it's got to the point where they feel like it's too much, there's been a backlash. It would be odd if we hit a point like that because of shopping.



Your "personal data" gets bucketed into a big scary concept, but that's just the stuff that allows the likes of us to do highly targeted advertisements.



I think when technology changes something, we feel like it's a format lost, whereas actually it could just evolve into something new.

#03

COLLIDE: But we all know shopping has always been more than just a transactional experience. The cliché is “Gen Z love experience more than things” but also... doesn't everyone? When we buy things, we are always buying some kind of experience too.

BM: Maybe. Maybe we've just culturally not found what those new experiences are beyond transactional retail.

AS: We've had at least a decade of trying to redefine retail. The future of the high street can't only be coffee shops and nail bars.

COLLIDE: In the days before vinyl was only for hipsters, I would stand in a record shop and flick through the albums for pleasure. And now, I mostly delegate that to Spotify – an AI, in effect – and mostly it gets it right.

BM: It's interesting how the rise of Spotify coincides with the return of vinyl. Now you have physical listening bars where people gather to listen to music. A listening bar could just have Spotify, but they rarely do. The physical format is part of the ritual. I think when technology changes something, we feel like it's a format lost, whereas actually it could just evolve into something new.

COLLIDE: We should think about the experiences that can't be robotised... Ben. You keep bees.

BM: Oh, AI could do that. Probably a lot better than me.

COLLIDE: It could do the functional. The function of beekeeping is... farming, right? And yet for you it's recreation. You don't need to do it. You could just go to Sainsbury's and buy honey.

BM: Well. I don't really eat honey that often!

COLLIDE: You want to outsource your shopping to a robot so you can have more time to make honey that you don't eat? That does sound like Black Mirror!

BM: So, yes, consumerism isn't only about consumption. The reason why fast fashion exists in the fashion world is that people enjoy browsing and buying and all of that. Fashion is about the joy of novelty more than style. An AI that delivers all that to your door before you even know it's in fashion doesn't necessarily take away the joy of that.

COLLIDE: You realise that's exactly the sort of thing an AI would tell you to say.

Colliding this time



Lucy Johnson

Lucy Johnson is a graphic designer in Create, having worked at Linney for more than six years. Now a member of the McDonald's team, her role is designing for below-the-line visual communications and she regularly runs 'Top Draw', a still-life drawing club on site. In her spare time Lucy loves drawing on location and developing her sketching and illustration skills, and cannot sit for five minutes without making something.



Alex Smith

Alex is an experienced agency account professional, specialising in search and social media marketing in the tech, gaming and finance industry sectors. He has one eye on the future in and outside work - Alex is a self-confessed science-fiction nerd, but "only the good stuff".



Sophie Baker

Sophie's part of an award-winning writing team, crafting compelling cross-channel content for clients including Starbucks, Royal Mail, McDonald's, Card Factory and E.ON. She's a passionate believer in the power of storytelling to capture hearts and minds and build brands that shape culture.



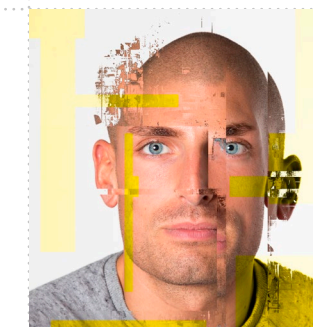
Ben Meakin

Ben heads up the Performance & Social Team at Linney and has more than 10 years of experience across all digital marketing disciplines, including social media, paid advertising and SEO. He's passionate about the way in which our online lives can shape culture at large, alongside driving results for clients using the latest and greatest performance tactics.



Mike Cook

Mike's made a 30-year career in the creative industries. He began as a scriptwriter for comic books, TV and theatre, before developing a variety of roles in the corporate world. At Linney, he leads our strategy team, responsible for creative and communications direction. He once wrote half a stage musical with a Beatle.



Jonathan Rhodes

Jonathan built Linney's award-winning Insight business from scratch over the course of a decade. He works across disciplines to deliver unique and impactful insights for clients including McDonald's, Boots, Post Office, Mars and Tesco. He's now Co-Director of Linney Create.

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