

## **The Wondrous Travels of Felix Ringtail**

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**Abstract:** This essay will take the reader through my personal musings that have been gathered through a 2 year long journey of working with generative image, video and audio creation systems, referred to popularly as Artificial Intelligence. I will try to make a case that this term is a misnomer, that the intelligence that brings about the results is the same old organic one with which humanity has manifested creativity throughout the ages - albeit, an organic intelligence that is now enhanced by a new and remarkably powerful tool. So powerful indeed that it can easily be confused with something that is intelligent / creative in its own right. But, is it really?

After focusing on how these novel generative systems affect creative output, I will conclude by taking a broader look at how “AI” is increasingly affecting the world around us. I will do so, not as an “AI enthusiast” but as someone who looks upon the entire phenomenon with great apprehension and worry, despite the fact that I am deeply immersed in the creative process that this remarkable technology has brought about.

### **The Journey**

I think of my entanglement with “AI” as the latest phase of a long journey that started over 30 years ago when I first encountered computer image editing software which opened up a world of magic for me: The software activated my imagination, indeed my imagination went into overdrive. I started making connections between visual material that I hadn’t made during all the years that I had worked with pen and paper. It could be the greatly enhanced speed of the process itself, it could be the ability to stack things on countless layers and move them around into ever new relationships, it could be the masking feature that let me blend things into ever new forms and shapes. Probably it was all of these and more. But one way or another what I was “drawing” electronically was very different from what I had done before. And, I am not just talking about the outcome, I am talking about my actual mental state as I was making the stuff.

And this enhanced imaginative state has continued between then and now, spread over many different softwares and platforms. I eventually became engrossed in 3D building for which I had to learn new techniques, some of which were not quite as spontaneous or intuitive as image editing, but the fast flow of imagination hasn’t left me as long as what I make comes about through electronic means.

### **“AI Art”?**

This said, I remained aloof to “AI Art” for a long time. It was the uniformity of the output that kept me away. Everything that I saw that had been generated with “AI” seemed to have been generated by one person only. The technique was always a glorified realism - amazing sunsets over cyber cities, spiky monsters and plastic beauties. Similar color palettes, similar compositions - and yes, let me say it - a sadly similar banality. So, I assumed that this was something inherent in technology and, somewhat disdainfully, stayed away.

### **And then...**

All of this changed when a friend, Eupalinos Ugajin showed me his “AI” work. I had been following Eupa’s 3D Second Life work for a long time with admiration. Eupa has a style that is very distinct - quirky, idiosyncratic, downright bizarre - and highly imaginative. Distinct forms, compositions. Distinct color palette. Distinct space usage. To my amazement, I saw that this very personal style was present in his generative output - indeed to such an extent that had I seen his “AI” pictures randomly, without knowing who had made them, I would immediately have associated them with Eupa.

So, I became curious and waded in. Or rather Felix Ringtail, a raccoon who was already one of my online personas, was the one who waded in and became the persona for this new phase of my electronic journey. Having seen Eupa’s images I knew that it was possible to develop a personal style that had nothing to do with the hyperplastic, overly well-defined and synthetically perfect style that I had associated with “AI” images up until then.



Cat and Crow Tale

### ***The Prompt***

So, I started making images. I soon saw that the wording of the prompt was important, however also that there was no need to write overly poetic or dramatic descriptions, that a simple list of what you wanted to see and also what you did not want to see was sufficient. But then came the issue of “style”, which is where personalization becomes actualized: At this point I became grateful to my knowledge of art / design history since putting the names of art and design styles into the prompt affected the outcome dramatically. But then, mixing these up brought even quirkier results: Why not mix “kitsch” with “bauhaus” and see what happens? But beyond the big art historical styles, names of specific artists or designers also had an impact. So, I started using names, especially in combinations with other names, as well.

But, obviously what I was after was making images that carried my personal style that had been developed over a lifetime, and not making images that were replicas of Bill Carman’s or Jacek Yerka’s work. This personal style of mine is whimsical, absurd, deformed, sometimes comical, mercurial, has a desaturated color palette, and is

never ever “serious” since my sole objective in making anything is “*for my own amusement, which is already good enough for me*”<sup>1</sup>.

### Models

I am not going to pretend that I got a result on the first day, or the second, or even the first or second week. But, after much trial and frustration, I slowly started to make “my sorts of pictures” - a process during which I discovered the second element that is crucial to getting a “style”, as crucial as the prompt itself - and that is the “model” or the combination of models that actually determine the look of the image. Models are large sets of images that have been thematically or stylistically curated and that are fed into an AI algorithm for it to extract the relevant visual cues and aggregate them into a model that is then applied while the image is being generated. They can be used alone but they can also be combined into model lists, at which point the outcome will likely become quite distinct and unique.



Pongo's World

### Gencraft

Having figured out this secret, I realized that the credit based AI platform that I was using at that time was insufficient to my needs - I needed the ability to make my own models at low cost. So, I went in search of a platform that would allow me to put together my own models without having to go bankrupt in the process. I had also realized that in order to get good results one needed to make huge series of images out of which only a handful of results were usually acceptable - something that with, again, a credit based system was unfeasible. One simply could not squander credits in order to be able to curate the best of the crop. However, that is precisely what I wanted to be able to do - to create hundreds of pictures only to delete almost all of them, keep only 2 or 3 at most, and then start all over in order to get just a few more.

I found what I was looking for in a community based platform called Gencraft. A monthly flat fee that was eminently reasonable - and then they set you loose to do as much as you like of the stuff. And create your own models to boot.<sup>2</sup> And once I had the run of the place - that is when my generative production really came into its

<sup>1</sup> Fernando Pessoa, Selected Prose 3 - 4

<sup>2</sup> Gencraft offers an almost free service, unlike most other platforms that charge through credits, despite the high cost of running a generative platform. This is because Gencraft is owned by hive.ai, a large AI company. I suspect Gencraft's purpose is to train hive.ai's algorithms using images generated by its user base for the benefit of hive.ai's clients. Their Terms of Service state they can close the platform without notice, reinforcing my belief that it's a utilitarian project that will

own. I did make models of my own, however I soon discovered that GC had a large library of user generated models and using some of them, especially in combination with my own, gave me the best results in terms of getting to a personal style that is also flexible enough to create variations.

### **Videos**

The ability to generate countless images soon led to series of images where I applied small changes to the prompt to create variations to the outcome. This coincided with a time where image to video platforms that create 5 second clips in which a still image becomes animated started to get talked about. The results were compelling enough to make me want to try my hand at it.

However, this made me face a major obstacle: I am not going to be falsely modest and say that I am an unimaginative person. But, my imagination has a flaw. I cannot for the life of me invent stories. My imagination is confined to frozen images, fixed moments in time. In that milieu, when it comes to creating pictures, or even 3D environments I do very well. That said I can never imagine what came before that frozen moment in time or what will happen next. And I had a strong sense that, no matter that people think they are making videos by stringing images together, that is not how this worked. One needed a thread, a continuation.

This led me to the idea of using a LLM chat application for creating stories out of still images. I do not normally use LLM apps, I therefore have no idea how I had this sudden inspiration to feed 3 images into ChatGPT and ask it to write a story about them. After much back and forth (the app is inherently biased towards being a politically correct goody-two-shoes, which I had to overcome with much scolding) I finally managed to get it to respond with a text that I was actually quite startled by - while it was a proper story, it was also funny, irreverent, absurd - so, maybe putting "Monty Python" into the query helped?... In any case, I now had the tool with which to make my video adventure take off. And, in a lifetime of making all sorts of things, and having a thoroughly good time doing all of them, I have never had as much fun doing anything as I do when I make these weird short videos.

Which is not to say that the whole thing happened without a steep learning curve that became very frustrating at times: Putting together a video involves different skills and I didn't have any of them. Again, generative platforms came to my aid when it came to voice and music, but the big challenge was to learn how to stitch the 5 second videos that I generated on the video platforms, and the voice and music into a cohesive whole. In other words, editing. That I am still learning I'm afraid, although I have gotten better at it over time through many a blunder and mishap.

### **AI or IA?**

It is easy to fall under the impression that this "thing" is actually intelligent, or as importantly in the case of creative activity, that it is endowed with imagination. This misconception becomes particularly apparent when using text based large language models, and I too initially became confused.

When what I knew to be just an algorithm that had no agency, that could only respond to queries started spewing out stories and lyrics that were remarkably poetic, full of the quirkiest story twists and turns, I was startled. At that point I had been writing prompts for quite a while and knew how the machine would respond, how what came out depended strictly on what I put in. What happened with LLM seemed to be of a different order. It seemed to give me more than what I had originally requested - it seemed to get more out of the images that I had fed it, than I myself could see in them.

But, this was only to be expected, of course, since it saw references in the images that I couldn't possibly have seen given that it "knew" more than I could ever possibly hope to know: It knew everything that had ever been written down and archived online. The "thing" had read every story, every tale, every fable that had ever been written, worked its way through all of the mythologies of the world, and to top it off knew of every written trick of story telling, of plot conception that had ever been put on paper. It had seen millions of images that held similar content to what I had fed it, used in millions of contexts, many as illustrations to tales and stories of all kinds. Of course, it could do what it did - without having to be "intelligent", without having to have an "imagination" of its own.

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be terminated once its usefulness expires. This would be a significant loss for me, as their services are not easily replaceable.

I do not have access to its repository of “knowledge”. It does. But what it doesn’t have is an “imagination” of its own - it can only aggregate all of the relevant imagination that has manifested over the course of human civilization. No mean feat - but not to be confused with the real thing - with organic imagination that emanates from our human minds. However, in the service of uniquely human imagination it becomes a tool of such immense power that our minds simply balk at its achievements. Which are actually, nothing but our own achievements. It is the collective achievements of humanity that the “thing” is putting into our hands as a novel tool.

Calling this tool “Artificial Intelligence” therefore, at least in my opinion, is a misnomer. One that was in all likelihood decided upon quite deliberately since the connotations of these two words used together suggest agency and autonomy. What should be seen as a mere tool, becomes scary. Becomes unfathomable. Becomes mystical almost. Becomes bigger than the user.

What I propose is an inversion of the acronym: “IA” instead of “AI” since the “thing” can be far more properly characterized as an “intelligence amplifier”, or in the case of creative work an “imagination amplifier”. Because that, in my experience, is precisely what it does. And that puts it in its proper place as a tool whose usage is entirely up to the user. And whose output is strictly circumscribed by our own innate intelligence or imagination.

What follows is based upon my own personal observations and may well be a controversial or unwelcome conclusion to some: IA (or AI) does not add to an individual's intelligence or imaginative capabilities. It can only enhance or amplify what is already native to its user. This becomes especially apparent when looking at visual output generated through IA, and this is where my considerations are coming from: Gencraft has a community feed to which users publish their pictures. Thousands upon thousands of images which are mostly, almost exclusively, a parade of beautiful women’s portraits. Almost always pensively posed, with slightly parted lips, gazing vacantly. Sprinkled among these beauties are spiky monsters, demons and warriors - again just standing around in threatening poses but not really doing much else. And then an even smaller sprinkling of cute kittens and landscapes and coffee scenes. A cup of coffee next to a bunch of flowers. A croissant if you are lucky. All highly realistic - women, monsters, kittens...

This subject matter constitutes almost the entirety of this feed. And yes, of course there is a minority of users who make remarkably creative imaginative pictures. So, the question is - why isn’t everyone doing this? Why would one sit in front of this “thing” that can make you a picture of anything that you can possibly imagine - and ask it to make you a picture of a beautiful woman? Or a spiky monster? And furthermore, why would you ask for this over and over and over again? Every day. Because that is one of the saddest things about this feed: The same people make the same images every day. Tirelessly. Over and over. Twenty, thirty everyday - often even more. And then start over the following day and churn out a whole new batch of exactly the same thing?

I fear that the conclusion is inevitable: The reason that all these beautiful women portraits are churned out in their thousands over and over again by the same people is that what the IA tool can do is strictly limited by the imagination potential of its user. They make the same highly realistic images over and over because that is the limit of their imagination, and the fact that the tool they are using is capable of vastly, indeed infinitely more, makes no difference to this reality.

However, from this follows another, much scarier, question: Can IA take away from the native imagination / intelligence of its user? In other words, can the “thing” be contributing to a general dumbing down of humanity? My instinct says, yes. Maybe less so, if used judiciously, with an awareness that it is a mere tool under the user’s control, but worryingly so, if a dependency on it is developed by its user. And this does seem to be substantiated by several studies<sup>3 4</sup> where it was found that while the usage of AI for creative purposes might show short term benefits, the long term implications are quite dire, resulting in a lessening of diversified content, bringing about a uniformity of thinking.

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<sup>3</sup> Kumar et al, 2024, “Human Creativity in the Age of LLMs”, Cornell University, <https://arxiv.org/pdf/2410.03703>

<sup>4</sup> Doshi and Hauser (2024) "Generative AI enhances individual creativity but reduces the collective diversity of novel content" <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/sciadv.adn5290>



Klee meets Klimt

### Dancing With the Devil

No matter how much I love making my videos, no matter what fun I have with them, I am acutely, severely aware that what I am doing here is dancing with the devil. And I would gratefully, joyfully give up the dance, and never look back with even the tiniest bit of regret if suddenly IA or AI, whatever one calls it, were to disappear from the world. A mass global power outage? What could bring that about? At this point, nothing, I fear.

The problem is precisely in the fact this is a tool that depends upon the capacities of its user for its usage. Meaning that it depends upon the good will of its user. The morality of its user. The humanity of its user. And what if these qualities are absent? It is an intelligence amplifier (I think I am onto something in that renaming), which makes its usage even more ominous in the hands of the people, who appear to be bereft of these qualities, for whom it was actually created.

Because, please be under no illusion, this “thing” was not created so that the likes of me could play around and make videos. It is a weapon. That is its primary usage. Its true purpose. A weapon of war, and a weapon of surveillance. A weapon for information control - indeed mind control. We only need recall Eric Schmidt’s response to Charlie Rose’s question regarding the ubiquitousness of google search results in 2005, years before the proliferation of AI, already pointing us to the end game:

*“Well, that’s a bug. We should be able to give you the right answer just once. We should know what you meant. You should look for information. We should get it exactly right.”* (2005)<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, no matter how complex the issue queried, no matter how many points of view there may be, no matter how argued it is, the owners of the system will see to it that you get only one answer - their answer! But

<sup>5</sup> <https://medium.com/the-ferenstein-wire/google-s-end-game-is-a-single-perfect-search-result-as-eric-schmidt-explains-in-one-quote-ab9d75309243>

it gets even worse when Ray Kurzweil lets it slip in 2013 that the ultimate idea is a “cybernetic friend” who will predict our questions before we even ask them.<sup>6</sup>

And all of this technology is already, currently in the hands of those who are using it to their nefarious ends even as I am writing this text - and things are hardly likely to get any better from here on out. Dictators and Kings and Sultans of the past could never even have dreamed of the power that the “thing” bestows upon its true owners today.

And that is where I am today. Dancing with the Devil. In full knowledge.



White Dream

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<sup>6</sup> <https://techcrunch.com/2013/01/06/googles-director-of-engineering-ray-kurzweil-is-building-your-cybernetic-friend>