# DISTRIBUTED CREATIVITY: RETHINKING AUTHORSHIP IN THE AGE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

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**Abstract**

Artificial intelligence is increasingly embedded in art and cultural production, reviving the question of who creates a work and to whom it should be attributed. This article situates AI-assisted production within a longer history of challenges to the figure of the solitary author, from Roland Barthes's "death of the author" and Michel Foucault's author function to the participatory practices of digital culture. It argues, however, that the distribution of authorship does not by itself demonstrate the distribution of creativity. Drawing on accounts that define creativity through novelty, value and social recognition, the article treats authorship, creativity and agency as related

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but analytically distinct questions. It then distinguishes two ideal types of distributed creativity: intentional-participatory distribution, in which contributors knowingly exercise some creative control over a shared work, as in *The Johnny Cash Project* and *This Exquisite Forest*; and infrastructural-asymmetric distribution, in which people, labour or cultural materials enter a production system without comparable awareness or influence over the outcome, as exposed by Aaron Koblin's *The Sheep Market*. Applied to generative AI, the distinction shows that users may work with models intentionally and iteratively while depending on training data, annotation work and infrastructures that remain largely invisible. Rather than treating AI as either an autonomous artist or a neutral tool, the article describes human–AI production systems in which creative control, attribution and benefit are unequally distributed, and it argues that questions of credit, consent and fair compensation must be addressed alongside, but separately from, the question of authorship.

**Keywords:** distributed creativity, authorship, creative control, generative AI, digital culture

## 1. Introduction

Artificial intelligence has had a significant impact on the creative industries, reshaping how cultural artefacts are produced. Its adoption in filmmaking, design, media and marketing has prompted sharply divided views. Some practitioners regard AI as a disruptive force that threatens employment and the position of human creators; others see it as a tool that can augment artistic practice, streamline production and open up new possibilities for experimentation.

Industry reports document the growing integration of AI into creative work, although their figures should not be mistaken for evidence of how artists understand their own creative contribution. According to the London School of Economics Growth Lab, more than 70% of marketers use generative AI every week (London School of Economics Growth Lab 2025). A 2025 survey by the recruitment agency Major Players found that 94% of the organisations surveyed had adopted AI across their workplaces and

workflows (Poole 2025). These figures describe professional use and organisational adoption, not whether artists consider their own contribution fundamental to AI-assisted work. Likewise, the World Economic Forum's projections concern the transformation of tasks and jobs rather than artists' self-understanding (World Economic Forum 2025).

The use of generative systems to produce scripts, animations, images and videos raises questions about originality, copyright and the attribution of creative work. In some cases, the human contribution may consist of a brief prompt and the selection of an output; in others, it may involve iterative prompting, extensive editing, compositing and a clear artistic concept. Because these workflows differ so significantly, neither the presence of AI nor the visible complexity of an output can by itself determine who should be credited as its author.

Policy discussion in the cultural and creative industries has also emphasised copyright, transparency, skills and accountability, as in the recommendations published by the German Commission for UNESCO (Hausmann, Baumgarten, and Müngersdorff 2024).

This article argues that AI-assisted production can be understood within a longer history of distributed cultural production, but that the concept of distributed creativity must be used with care. Roland Barthes famously proclaimed the "death of the author", while Michel Foucault examined the institutional workings of the author function. Neither claim, by itself, establishes that AI systems are creative. To address this gap, the article first distinguishes creativity from authorship, then reviews participatory models of digital production, and finally considers AI as a form of non-human agency. It develops a distinction between intentional-participatory and infrastructural-asymmetric distribution, using existing works of digital art – especially Aaron Koblin's *The Sheep Market* – to show why the distinction matters for generative AI.

## 2. Authorship and creativity: from philosophical traditions to contemporary debate

The philosophical understanding of authorship and creativity has changed over time, reflecting broader ideas about knowledge, individuality and artistic production. In Plato's account, mimetic art is not a transparent expression of knowledge: it imitates appearances and is therefore twice removed from the Forms and from knowledge of reality (Plato 1992: 595a–602b). Artistic imitation is thus treated critically, as a copy of a copy, rather than as a means of access to the true domain of meaning.

During the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, cultural and intellectual developments increasingly foregrounded individual talent, reason and intellectual ownership. Romanticism intensified the image of the artist as an autonomous genius whose originality springs from personal inspiration and inner experience. Although this model remains influential, it obscures the social, material and institutional conditions that make creative work possible.

In "The Death of the Author", Roland Barthes challenges the idea that the author's intention is the final authority on a text's meaning: meaning emerges through language, cultural codes and reading, rather than being secured by the biography or intention of a single originator (Barthes [1967] 1977: 142–148). Michel Foucault's "What Is an Author?" similarly treats authorship as a historically situated function through which discourse is classified, regulated and assigned value (Foucault [1969] 1977: 113–138). These arguments unsettle the author as the sole source of meaning, but they do not imply that all contributors have equal control, that all outputs are creative, or that responsibility for a work disappears.

Authorship is a social, legal and institutional attribution, whereas creativity refers to a capacity or process associated with producing something novel and meaningful or valuable. The two concepts overlap, but they are not interchangeable. A person may be legally recognised as an author without being the sole source of every element in a work; conversely, a process may involve novel combinations without making every contributing person or system an author. This article therefore treats authorship, creativity and agency as related but analytically separate questions.

### 3. What do we mean by creativity?

Creativity is not a self-evident label for anything new or surprising. Influential psychological accounts commonly associate creativity with both novelty and appropriateness or value, although the criteria vary by domain and community (Runco & Jaeger 2012). Margaret Boden distinguishes combinational, exploratory and transformational creativity, describing different ways in which ideas or conceptual spaces can be recombined, explored or changed (Boden 2004). This framework helps to explain why the production of an unusual combination by a generative system does not automatically settle whether the result is creative: one must ask what kind of novelty is involved, against which constraints, and according to whose standards of evaluation.

Creativity can also be understood as a social process rather than a property residing exclusively inside an individual. Csikszentmihalyi's systems

model places creativity at the intersection of a person, a domain of symbolic knowledge and a field of social gatekeepers who recognise or reject innovations (Csikszentmihalyi 1996). Sawyer's work on group creativity likewise shows how creative outcomes can emerge through interaction and coordination, rather than simply by adding together individual contributions (Sawyer 2007). These perspectives help to distinguish the generation of an artefact from the social process through which it is judged creative.

Literat and Glăveanu (2016) use the concept of distributed creativity to examine creative expression in the internet age, including the ways in which participation, technology and social relations shape creative activity. Their approach offers a useful foundation for analysing networked cultural production, but distribution should not be romanticised. A network may enable people to exercise creative agency while also distributing labour, data and risk unevenly. The question is not only whether creativity is distributed, but how it is distributed: who knows that they are participating, who can influence the outcome, and who receives recognition or benefit.

For the purposes of this article, creativity is therefore treated as a situated process involving some combination of novelty, selection, interpretation, evaluation and social recognition. These dimensions need not be present in the same way for every participant. The definition does not prejudge whether an AI system can be creative; rather, it makes clear that the question cannot be answered solely by deciding who owns or authors the final artefact.

## 4. Two forms of distributed creativity in digital culture

Scholars of digital culture have challenged models that locate cultural production in a single autonomous creator. Networked media make visible the contributions of users, platforms, technologies and institutions, while circulation and reinterpretation continually alter the meanings of cultural artefacts. Yet the term "distributed" can describe very different arrangements. This article distinguishes two ideal types: intentional-participatory distribution and infrastructural-asymmetric distribution. The two can overlap in a single project, but they should not be merged into one category.

### 4.1. Intentional-participatory distribution

Henry Jenkins's account of participatory culture describes audiences who actively remake, interpret and extend media texts. Fans may write fiction, remix images or develop alternative storylines, thereby blurring the distinction between producer and consumer (Jenkins 2006). Such participants

generally know that they are contributing to a cultural practice, and their contribution is intentional, even where their influence over the final product varies. Similarly, open-source software and collaborative encyclopaedias such as Wikipedia distribute work across contributors who knowingly edit, maintain or revise a shared resource. Attribution and governance may be imperfect, but participation is at least partly visible and purposeful.

Pierre Lévy's concept of "collective intelligence" (Lévy 1997) describes knowledge as distributed across communities and enhanced through networked interaction. His account helps to explain how a group can develop capacities that no single member possesses in full. Collective intelligence, however, presupposes communication and participation among people; transferring the framework to human–AI systems requires an argument about the differences between intentional human participants and computational systems that do not possess human understanding or experience.

*The Johnny Cash Project*, directed by Chris Milk and developed with Aaron Koblin in 2010, is an example of intentional-participatory distribution. Participants used a web-based drawing tool to create portraits based on individual frames of the video for "Ain't No Grave"; these submissions were assembled into an evolving collective music video (Milk & Koblin 2010). Contributors knew that they were making images for a shared project and could exercise stylistic choice within its format. This does not make every participant equally responsible for the work as a whole, but it does make their participation meaningfully intentional.

*This Exquisite Forest*, an online collaborative art experiment presented by Google and Tate Modern in 2012, similarly invited users to make animations that extended or branched off from earlier contributions (Google Data Arts Team 2012). Participants could see their work as part of a shared, developing structure. These examples show that digital technologies can enable distributed creativity when participants knowingly contribute and can exercise some creative control.

### 4.2. Infrastructural-asymmetric distribution

A second form of distribution occurs when people, labour or cultural materials become part of a production system without comparable awareness of, intention towards or control over the resulting work. This is not simply another instance of participatory collaboration. The contributors may be separated from the final artefact by platforms, contracts, data pipelines or opaque technical processes; their labour may be invisible, while value and recognition accumulate elsewhere. The term "infrastructural-asymmetric

distribution" is used here to foreground these asymmetries, not to claim that all such cases are identical.

Aaron Koblin's *The Sheep Market* (2006) is especially revealing. The project paid people working through Amazon Mechanical Turk two cents each to draw a sheep; some 10,000 drawings were then collected into an online artwork and offered for sale as a larger set. The workers performed the requested task, but the framing of the project as art and the subsequent circulation of the collection were not necessarily part of their own creative intention. Accounts of the project have noted the tension between making otherwise invisible crowdworkers visible and exploiting low-paid platform labour for an artwork (Barr 2006; Mieszkowski 2006).

*The Sheep Market* should therefore not be presented simply as an example of a community intentionally co-authoring an artwork. It can instead be interpreted as a work that stages and exposes the second form of distribution: numerous human actions are assembled into a work whose overarching artistic concept and public meaning are controlled primarily by the commissioning artist. The workers drew individual sheep, but the extent to which they understood or shaped the final artwork was limited. The project is valuable precisely because it makes the gap between contribution and control visible.

This distinction also complicates the language used to describe generative AI. Training data may contain texts, images or other cultural works created by people who did not knowingly contribute to a particular model or output. Data labellers, annotators and other workers may shape systems through labour that is rarely visible in the generated artefact. Model developers determine architectures and training processes; platform providers set the terms of access; users prompt, select and edit outputs; and audiences and institutions assign meaning and value. These roles differ in intention, control, knowledge and benefit. Calling the entire arrangement "collaboration" risks implying a symmetry that may not exist.

The two forms of distribution are ideal types rather than mutually exclusive categories. An artist may knowingly collaborate with a model while relying on a training infrastructure that includes people whose works were incorporated without their consent. A user may exert substantial control over prompting and editing but little control over the model's training data, design or commercial terms. Analysis should therefore map different contributions separately, instead of treating the finished artefact as evidence that all participants collaborated in the same sense.

## 5. Artificial intelligence as a novel form of agency

Luciano Floridi's account of AI as a form of agency without intelligence challenges the assumption that systems must possess human-like understanding in order to produce effects in the world (Floridi 2025). His Multiple Realisability of Agency Thesis treats agency as something that can be realised by different kinds of system. On this view, AI can be operationally agentive without being conscious, having subjective experience or understanding the ethical significance of its actions.

This distinction matters for creativity. AI systems generate outputs through computational processes trained on data and configured by design choices, objectives and prompts. Their outputs can be surprising and may be judged useful or aesthetically compelling by people. These observable effects, however, do not establish that a system has human intentions, imagination or an experience of making art. Nor does the absence of human-like consciousness automatically settle every possible definition of creativity. It means, rather, that claims about AI creativity must specify the criteria being used and distinguish system performance from human experience and responsibility.

Floridi's framework draws a boundary between human and artificial forms of action. Jenkins's participatory culture and Lévy's collective intelligence, by contrast, largely describe forms of collaboration among intentional human agents, and they cannot simply be transferred to AI without qualification. If one participant is not a mind in the human sense, what does collective intelligence mean? It may be more precise to speak of a "human–AI production system", in which people exercise intention, evaluation and accountability while computational systems contribute transformations and outputs. Such a system may produce an artefact that no single human could have produced alone, but this does not show that all its elements participate with equal agency or responsibility.

Liu and Huang (2025) argue that authorship in human–AI collaboration should be assessed in terms of creative control rather than technical execution alone. Creative control involves conceiving, guiding, evaluating and revising a work throughout the production process. In text-to-image work, for example, a user may formulate prompts, compare outputs, revise instructions and carry out substantial post-production editing. Such decisions may support a claim to human authorship even where the system generates much of the visible material.

Creative control is nevertheless only one dimension of the wider problem. It can help to identify who shaped a particular output, but it does not settle whether the model's operation should be called creative, whether

training materials were used legitimately, or whether hidden labour and data contributions should be recognised. Human authorship of an output and the ethical legitimacy of the infrastructure behind it are separate questions. A person may exercise meaningful control over a generated image while knowing little about the conditions under which the system was trained.

The same analysis cautions against describing AI either as a wholly autonomous artist or as a neutral instrument. A generative system is embedded in a sociotechnical network of developers, training data, infrastructure, labour, users and institutions. Its outputs depend on that network, but the network contains unequal relations of knowledge and control. The task for research is therefore not merely to decide whether creativity belongs to humans or to machines, but to explain how creative capacity, decision-making, attribution and value are distributed across a specific production arrangement.

## 6. Conclusion: creativity after the death of the author

From post-structuralist challenges to authorial authority to contemporary participatory media, cultural production has increasingly been understood as dependent on networks of texts, people, technologies and institutions. Generative AI extends this history, but it also makes its inequalities harder to ignore. The "death of the author" does not mean the disappearance of creative labour or accountability; nor does distributed authorship automatically demonstrate distributed creativity.

The article has distinguished between intentional-participatory distribution, in which contributors knowingly exercise some creative control over a shared work, and infrastructural-asymmetric distribution, in which people, labour or cultural materials enter a system without comparable awareness of or influence over the final outcome. *The Johnny Cash Project* and *This Exquisite Forest* illustrate the former, while *The Sheep Market* exposes the tensions of the latter. The distinction is particularly useful for generative AI, where user interaction may be intentional and iterative even as the model's training and operation rely on broader, often opaque infrastructures.

The argument does not require abandoning the claim that AI continues a longer history of distributed production; instead, it refines that claim. Human–AI production may involve distributed processes and surprising outputs, but authorship, creativity, agency and ethical responsibility remain distinct analytical questions. Liu and Huang's creative-control approach helps to explain the role of human intention and evaluation in authorship, while research on creativity shows why novelty, value and recognition must also be considered. Floridi's account of non-human agency, meanwhile,

cautions against assuming that computational participation is equivalent to human collaboration.

The central question is therefore not simply whether AI replaces human creativity, but how creative work is organised: who intends to make a work, who can direct or revise it, whose cultural materials and labour sustain it, who receives credit and economic benefit, and who is held responsible for its effects. Treating these questions separately makes it possible to understand AI as part of a distributed creative ecology without allowing the language of collaboration to conceal the asymmetries within it.

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