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Unmaking Artistic Style in the Age of Illustration with Generative AI: a case study of Jim Lee on Midjourney

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Abstract

The present work investigates the relationship between an illustrator's human hand, her artistic style, and generative artificial intelligence, with a focus on attempting to produce and duplicate a popular comic book artist's visual style. Mixed methodologies are employed, including self-observation of human-AI interaction (SANTOS, 2020), deconstruction of the AI used (MUNN ET AL., 2023), and output analysis (SALVAGGIO, 2023). The author interacted with Midjourney to produce images using the name Jim Lee as a prompt. Lee is an American comic book illustrator who is most famous for being one of the major artists to depict the dominating comics style, "idealism" (BROWN, 2023). The potential for computer mimicry of human artistic styles is examined in the last section, along with any potential theoretical and commercial ramifications.

Keywords

Generative AI; Artistic Style; Comic Book Art; Creative Industries; Visual Representation.

Introduction

At the close of 2022, the appearance of highly realistic, AI-generated images sparked a mix of excitement and concern. These visuals, which blur the line between reality and simulation, have prompted urgent discussions in visual culture studies around issues such as representation, plagiarism, copyright, and the potential for deceptive or misleading content (Wilde, 2023, p. 20). Additionally, they have influenced professional practices (Tavares, 2024; Crabapple & Marx, 2023; Zhou, 2023) and prompted shifts in fan art and fan community dynamics (Lamerichs, 2023).

However, when we examine non-realistic AI-generated images—such as drawings, illustrations, and paintings—new questions emerge regarding mediality, authorship, artistic technique, the role of humans in visual creation, and the circulation of these images in contemporary culture. In traditional, “pre-technological images”¹, the human artist is visible on the surface of the work. In contrast, machine-generated art conceals this presence, embedding it within layers of code, data, and computational processes (Kittler, 1980). Here, the human contribution shifts from the visible surface to a deeper level (the *subface*²), manifesting both as a “*promptist*”³ and through data traces that inform the creation of the image.

This article examines the relationship between the human drawing hand and artistic style in commercial graphic art, with a particular focus on attempts to generate and replicate the visual style of a successful comic book artist. We employed a mixed-methods approach, including self-observation of human-AI interaction (Santos, 2020), deconstruction of the generative AI processes (Munn et al., 2023), and analysis of the generated outputs (Salvaggio, 2023). In this exploratory experiment, the author interacted with Midjourney to create images using prompts inspired by the style of renowned American comic book illustrator Jim Lee, who exemplifies the dominant “idealist” style in comics, as identified by Brown (2023).

The decision to focus on a living comic book illustrator stems from several considerations. Comic art, particularly in the popular superhero genre, is often perceived as less legitimate than “fine art” and is frequently regarded as ephemeral or disposable. This perception contributes to the uncertainty and precariousness that comic artists face in an era of technological advancement. Unlike well-organized unions of actors and screenwriters who have mobilized to protect their work from AI-generated content threats⁴, North American comic book artists generally lack strong collective representation, partly due to their identification more as artists than as workers (Woo, 2018). Nonetheless, this ambiguous status has prompted comic illustrators to organize in new ways, speaking out against artificial intelligence in creative industries (Blum, 2022). At the same time, amateur artists have begun using generative AI tools, such as DALL-E and Midjourney, to produce independent comics⁵, showcasing emerging production methods within commercial art. As AI-driven creation becomes more widely recognized, even among established

1 Following Vilém Flusser (2011), we distinguish between machine-generated (technological) images and human-generated (“traditional”) images. While this distinction is not the text's focus, we recognize that this terminology inverts art history, positioning technology as the constant and the absence of technology as the variable.

2 “The *surface* of the image is *visible*, while the *subface* is *manipulable*” (Frieder Nake, 2005, quoted in CEDEÑO MONTAÑA & VAGT, 2018, p.4).

3 The term is used by the AI art community to designate the person who *inputs* an order into the system via a *prompt*. A *prompt* is a text or set of texts that is provided to an AI language model as input to generate a new text or, in these *text-to-image* technologies, a new image. The term *promptist* qualifies the technique of the *subface* manipulator by bringing it closer to an art.

4 Retrieved Oct 5, 2023 from <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/business/business-news/ftc-hearing-ai-sagafta-wga-1235609247>

5 Cf. <<https://twitter.com/chaseleantj/status/1702280718226014368>> Retrieved September 15, 2023.

digital artists, concerns grow over whether traditional art professionals—illustrators, graphic designers, and comic artists—might one day face obsolescence.

Details of the experiment will be provided later; first, we will outline the methodological framework, as this study introduces a new subject within the field of Communication. The following section will identify and define the key elements of Jim Lee’s artistic style, establishing a foundation for the experimental interaction with the AI model. We will then examine the concept of artistic style in the context of generative AI, concluding with insights and identifying areas for further research.

Undoing Midjourney

We begin with the assumption that generative AI produces results that can be explored through prompts and interactions with its interface, thereby revealing specific patterns and logics underlying the model. This perspective is supported by other scholars (Salvaggio, 2023; Wasielewski, 2023; Manovich, 2024), particularly as generative AI interfaces have gained popularity in recent months. Consequently, new methodological tools have been developed to examine the “black box” of these advanced technologies.

Munn et al. (2023) connect two distinct research areas to explore macro-level aspects of generative AI. The first area encompasses media studies, software studies, and critical AI analysis, concentrating on the technical frameworks and algorithmic logics that shape these systems. The second area draws from art history, art theory, cultural studies, and political economy, focusing on the creation and curation of image archives while examining their cultural, ideological, and political impacts. Based on these foundations, the authors propose a three-dimensional analytical framework for understanding generative AI that aims to address the fragmentation within these models. The three dimensions are: “Undoing the Ecosystem,” which investigates the production structures of generative AI models; “Undoing the Data,” which scrutinizes the images and texts used by the models, emphasizing inherent biases; and “Undoing the Output,” which analyzes generated outputs to reveal underlying logics through interaction. We will use this layered framework as the basis for our experiment in this paper.

“Undoing the ecosystem” entails analyzing the media ecology and technical systems surrounding the model to understand corporate structures, capital investments, hardware, development teams, and the online communities that form around a given AI-generated image system. Although we have previously examined how diffusion models function (Telles, 2023), it is important to review the fundamental principles underlying their operation. Images produced by diffusion models⁶ — such as DALL-E 2, Stable Diffusion, or Midjourney — originate from random Gaussian noise⁷, a process where images gradually lose information as their surfaces degrade. The model’s goal is to track this noise propagation, or “diffusion,” throughout the image. As images degrade, noise tends to accumulate in regions where similar pixels cluster. These pixel groups, represented as mathematical coordinates, are linked to textual labels so the model can identify them when needed. When prompted, the model reverses the process: starting with the noise layer, it works iteratively to transform this layer into an image that aligns with the textual description provided. This transformation is achieved through a series of additive steps (Salvaggio, 2023; Wilde, 2023).

6 These images differ from those generated by generative adversarial networks (GANs). GANs consist of two components—the generator and the discriminator—working in tandem. The generator’s goal is to produce data that can deceive the discriminator, while the discriminator’s role is to distinguish between real and generated (“fake”) data. This adversarial process improves the generator’s ability to create realistic yet deceptive information and increases the likelihood of the discriminator incorrectly classifying generated data as real (Google, n.d.). Images generated by GANs have gained popularity in recent years and are commonly known as “deepfakes.”

7 Gaussian noise is a type of noise in which the amplitude of variations follows a bell curve, meaning most variations cluster around the mean, while more extreme variations are less common. Historically, in computer imaging, Gaussian noise was something to be filtered out, often using techniques like “Gaussian blur.” However, in the diffusion process described here, Gaussian noise instead serves as the foundational source from which any meaning is derived.

A detailed understanding of this technology enables us to differentiate between its “model” and its “platform.” Van Dijck et al. (2018) define a platform as “fed with data, automated and organized through algorithms and interfaces, formalized by ownership relationships guided by business models and governed by user agreements” (p. 9). In this context, the *model* refers to a specific, proprietary update of the diffusion-AI technology, while the platform represents the user interface. Expanding on Van Dijck’s definition, D’Andrea (2020) offers a heuristic tool that breaks platforms down into core components, including data, algorithms, interface, ownership, business model, and user guidelines. Given that data and algorithms are the primary focus of this study, our analysis will center on the other elements of Midjourney.

Midjourney is a generative-AI model developed by an independent laboratory in Silicon Valley, founded by David Holz, who previously co-founded Leap Motion. The model entered beta testing in July 2022, and its brief existence highlights the complexity of contemporary AI technologies. Since no detailed documentation on its operation is available, some speculate that Midjourney may function primarily as a user interface for the generative model Stable Diffusion⁸. Stable Diffusion, in contrast, is recognized for its role in the “democratization of image production” (Munn et al., 2023), as it allows users to directly manipulate the model, unlike Midjourney’s “curated” environment, which produces professional-quality results with minimal user intervention⁹. Access to Midjourney’s cloud-based processing is available through a monthly subscription, ranging from \$10 (for 200 images per month) to \$30 (for unlimited images). All images generated within the system are public and accessible to other users, although users can pay an additional fee to keep their images private.

Midjourney does not have its own standalone user interface; instead, it is accessible through a free Discord account, where users can join various rooms to generate images (see Image 1). Interaction with the model is facilitated by a bot, using commands that begin with “/imagine.” To create images, users input a prompt, which can include text or an image, prioritizing key words at the start of the command. Specific details, such as aspect ratio or model version, are added at the end of the prompt. After processing, which may take seconds or minutes, Midjourney returns four image suggestions (see Image 1). For each image, users have two options: “enlarge” (U) to obtain a more detailed version with a resolution of 1.5 megapixels or “vary” (V) to receive a variation. With the release of version 5.2 in July 2023, the system also offers additional zoom and image displacement options, allowing users to zoom in/out and adjust images horizontally or vertically.

8 See <<https://www.theverge.com/2023/1/16/23557098/generative-ai-art-copyright-legal-lawsuit-stable-diffusion-midjourney-deviantart>>.

9 Praise for Stable Diffusion from the subculture forming around generative AI often overlooks that many customized versions of the model reflect biases associated with the heterosexual male gaze, frequently emphasizing themes like anime and pornographykeywords.

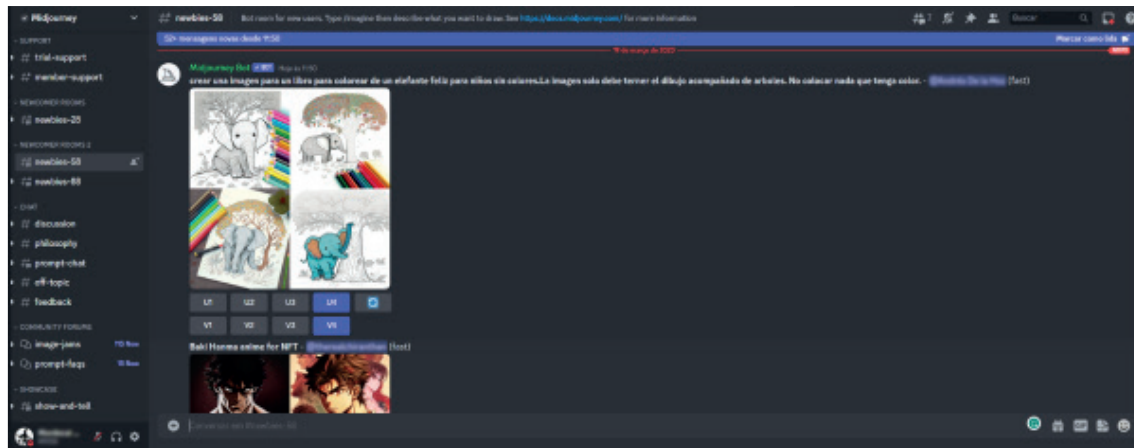


IMAGE 1 – One of the many Discord channels available for image generation. Note the Midjourney bot in the center. SOURCE – Author. March 19, 2023.

The second operation focuses on “undoing the data.” As Salvaggio (2023) observes, images generated by generative AI function as “infographics” of the information within their databases. In this view, each image serves as an informational space, essentially a data package designed to reveal or represent the patterns of the dataset on which the model was trained (Salvaggio, 2023; Munn et al., 2023).

Midjourney does not disclose the database used to train its model, but since the company has not denied that it may be a simplified version of Stable Diffusion, it is reasonable to infer that both models share the same dataset. The model developed by the German company Stability.AI relies on images from LAION, a non-governmental, non-profit organization that compiles open datasets for AI training¹⁰. LAION collects images from the internet, effectively making the web “an *unintentional* source for AI training data”, as noted by one of the creators of the generative AI Consensus (quoted in Thompson, 2022, emphasis added). Artists, photographers, and illustrators have voiced opposition to this practice, asserting that their work is included in the LAION database without their consent (Benzine, 2022). A dedicated website¹¹ now allows them to check if their work has been used to train these models. By searching “Jim Lee” on this site, we found images that may have been used by Midjourney to generate the images that will be presented later (see Image 2).

10 LAION-5B, used by Stable Diffusion (and perhaps Midjourney), has more than 5.85 billion text/image pairs. See < <https://laion.ai/>>.

11 <haveibeenentrained.com>

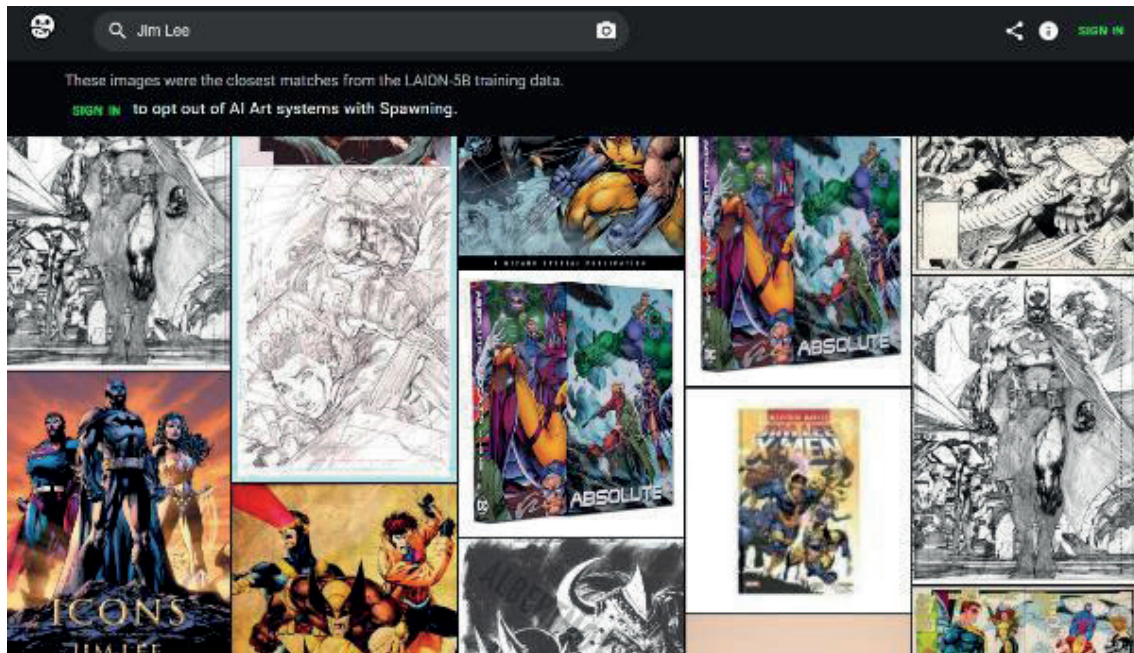


IMAGE 2 – Search “Jim Lee” in the LAION 5B database. SOURCE - <haveibeentrained.com>. Author. September 21, 2023.

It should be noted that commercial models such as Midjourney and DALL-E, unlike Stable Diffusion, incorporate a level of data intervention, which involves systemic design choices, like content filters, to restrict the generation of specific types of images (Salvaggio, 2023). For instance, DALL-E excludes pornographic content from its dataset to prevent the creation of explicit images. In contrast, LAION’s dataset includes explicit and violent material, requiring the platform to intervene at the prompt level by prohibiting certain words.

Finally, by “undoing the output,” we will conduct a systematic analysis of generative AI model production based on our direct interactions with them. The self-exploration/self-observation method, introduced by Santos (2020) in her doctoral thesis on virtual personal assistants, offers a way to reveal the operational logics of AI by using ethnographic techniques to document field interactions. Details of the specific method used will be provided in the experiment section. For now, it is essential to reflect on what “output” signifies in the context of generative AI.

Generative AI models, such as Midjourney, produce image artifacts that lack indexical relations, instead navigating vast “latent spaces of potential images” (Meyer, 2023) to synthesize existing data elements into new compositions. According to Salvaggio (2023), this process reveals underlying human biases embedded within the datasets and their organization. Observing AI-generated images, he argues, is akin to observing the datasets that trained them, as these images reflect shared cultural perspectives on the depicted subjects. The characteristics of the generated images vary on a spectrum: they exhibit strong, distinct attributes when aligning with cultural ideals, and weak or ambiguous qualities when deviating from this norm. Consequently, as Salvaggio (2023) notes, generative AI systems highlight both the content and the limitations of the source dataset, revealing challenges in representing subjects that fall outside clear categorization or standard prompts.

The resulting image is regarded as a “visual interpretation” of a prior verbal expression, serving both as a cause and a linguistic stimulus (Meyer, 2023). This underscores an evolution toward using language as a tool for generating images—an unprecedented development in the history of visual creation. Consequently, interaction with generative AI resembles a search process more than a traditional production method (Meyer, 2023). It is as though the user is guiding the model to explore a particular

area within the “latent space” of virtual images. This interaction enables users to create virtually limitless variations from a single prompt, even while the precise workings of the algorithms remain opaque to both users and developers (Wilde, 2023).

Salvaggio (2023, p. 89ff) proposes an output analysis method that involves generating successive images until one of particular interest is found. Once a relevant image is identified, its characteristics are thoroughly described, noting both prominent and subtler features. A new set of samples is then generated using the same prompt, followed by a content analysis of these images to identify patterns and focal areas. These patterns are used to assess the strengths and limitations of the original dataset. Finally, the initial image of interest is re-evaluated based on insights gained from this analysis.

We will apply this method to analyze the output of our experiment. However, since Salvaggio’s approach was originally developed to analyze generative AI databases in relation to textual inputs to uncover their “latent space,” and we aim to compare human-produced images with machine-generated images within that same space, we will incorporate a comparative method alongside content analysis. Ideally, this approach will allow us to “reverse engineer” the AI models and apply a method akin to the one used to train these models.

The identification of artistic styles within the neural networks that power generative AI models is, somewhat ironically, based on a technique created in the 19th century to expose human forgers: visual stylometry. This method, developed by Italian physician Giovanni Morelli, proposed analyzing works of art by focusing on seemingly insignificant details, such as earlobes, fingernails, and the shape of fingers (Ginzburg, 1989). These details were considered revealing because they remained consistent in authentic works but tended to vary in forgeries. Although initially criticized as overly mechanical, this method was foundational to the development of psychoanalysis, emphasizing interpretation based on residual and marginal data (Ginzburg, 1989, pp. 145-151). The method has since been computerized and is now a standard in image decomposition processes. As researchers in computerized visual stylometry note, “What Morelli did with his eyes and brain, researchers are now trying to accomplish through statistical and image processing techniques” (Graham et al., 2012, p. 116). This approach can identify (and even help construct) an artist’s style and can be used to create images with the artistic “signature” of an individual, even if the artist has long passed.

The next step in the process is to construct a visual repository that encapsulates Jim Lee’s distinctive artistic style. This repository will serve as a foundation for our comparative analysis with the images generated by Midjourney.

Jim Lee and his style

In comics, the visual elements that make up the style are an integral part of the overall experience and content of the work (Peppard, 2019) and, for some theorists, can be seen as the very essence of comics (Postema, 2018). Brown (2023, p.2) notes that art is so significant in comics that “changes in artists and artistic styles can drastically and viscerally affect the different interpretations within the genre”.

Brown (2023) identifies six distinct contemporary styles in superhero illustration: Idealism, Realism, Cute, Retro, Grotesque, and Noir. Idealism, the central focus of this analysis and the style represented by Jim Lee, is so foundational to the genre that it often serves as the benchmark against which other styles are evaluated. The idealist style emphasizes perfectly idealized superhero bodies, characterized by exaggerated and stereotypical physical traits—such as pronounced muscles for men and curvaceous figures for women. It underscores physical perfection as a symbol of both strength and moral virtue (Brown, 2023, pp. 61-70).

The 1990s marked a period of controversial shifts in the U.S. comic book industry, characterized by rapid expansion fueled by market speculation, followed by a dramatic downturn (Wright, 2001). In 1991,

annual comic book sales surpassed the \$1 billion mark for the first time. However, by 1996, following fan boycotts against publishers' predatory practices and speculators' realization that their investments would not yield the anticipated returns, sales in the direct market had fallen to \$450 million (Wright, 2001, p. 283).

This shift was fueled by a historic reversal in the industry's balance of power, marked by the emergence of a new generation of superstar artists, including Todd McFarlane, Rob Liefeld, and Jim Lee. To capitalize on their popularity, Marvel launched new series to showcase each artist's work, resulting in tremendous successes: *Spider-Man*, *X-Force*, and *X-Men*, respectively. The first issue of *X-Men*, illustrated by Lee, remains the best-selling comic book in American history, with 8 million copies sold. Rather than simply satisfying their demand for recognition, this popularity empowered Lee and his peers to take control of their creative work, ultimately leading them to establish the independent publisher Image Comics alongside other artists.

Led by Jim Lee and his fellow artists, Image Comics marked a transformative shift in the American comic book industry. By rebelling against the tradition of creating stories with pre-existing characters, they introduced an exaggerated, extreme visual style (Céspedes González, 2022), pushing the boundaries of the genre's conventions. According to Peppard (2019), this style was an attempt to both appropriate and redefine genre conventions, asserting a distinct, immediately recognizable individuality that extended beyond artistic expression alone.

In the artwork of Todd McFarlane, Jim Lee, and Rob Liefeld, male characters are often depicted with small heads and oversized shoulders and biceps, while female characters feature extremely narrow waists and exaggerated breasts or hips. Beyond this pronounced muscular dimorphism in male characters and the sensualized forms of female characters, the art of this period is notable for its early adoption of digital coloring techniques. This approach introduced gradients, metallic flares, and vibrant colors, giving the artwork a unique and striking visual style (see Image 3).



IMAGE 3 – Art by Jim Lee. Observe the contrasting proportions between male and female bodies that characterize the art of this period. SOURCE – X-MEN #1, 1991.

Peppard (2019) describes Jim Lee's style as one that portrays superheroes with bodies composed of distinct, almost mechanical parts. His male characters often exhibit rigid, square physiques, embodying an exaggerated masculinity. The meticulous depiction of body details, such as sharply defined pectorals and abdominal muscles, encourages readers to scrutinize these bodies closely, subtly challenging traditional gender roles. The complexity of these bodies, constructed with numerous detailed, individual parts, implies that these superheroes could be dismantled or modified. As a result, Lee's superheroes must continually demonstrate their ability to control their bodies. This blend of rigidity and "ultra-detailed

partible-ness” (Peppard, 2019, p. 10) symbolizes their heroism—their capacity to remain steadfast, self-contained, and prepared for action, even when confronting forces that threaten to pull them apart.

Lee’s superheroines, by contrast, are depicted with smooth, elongated bodies, featuring abs defined by a single central line, cylindrical limbs, and large, firm breasts (Peppard, 2019). This portrayal perpetuates conventional feminine beauty standards, yet it simultaneously challenges these norms by exaggerating feminine traits to an almost artificial, hyper-sexualized degree, with breasts that appear as if molded from rigid materials. However, like their male counterparts, Lee’s superheroines are often shown in static poses, conveying a different type of rigidity. For Peppard (2019), this feminine rigidity may symbolize fantasies of power and self-control, linked to patriarchal expectations that women occupy less physical space and conform to ideals of femininity.

In terms of technique, Lee uses an F-grade graphite, slightly harder than the traditional HB, resulting in thick, dynamic lines that imbue his art with a sense of chaos and energy (Phipps et al., 2009). He also applies a dry brush technique to create gray-toned areas with an irregular texture by rubbing India ink on the paper with a tissue, producing distinctive hatching and smudging effects, as seen on Magneto’s face (the third face in Image 4). Using a "Morellian table," additional elements in Lee’s art become apparent, including detailed fingernails (see the second and third hand images in Image 4), full lips for female characters in contrast to the nearly nonexistent lips of male characters, and perhaps his most infamous trait: pointed feet. Finally, it is important to note that Lee’s style is not solely his own. In the comic book industry, while pencillers and inkers collaborate closely, a hierarchy exists that places greater emphasis on the role of pencillers (Beaty, 2012, p. 87).

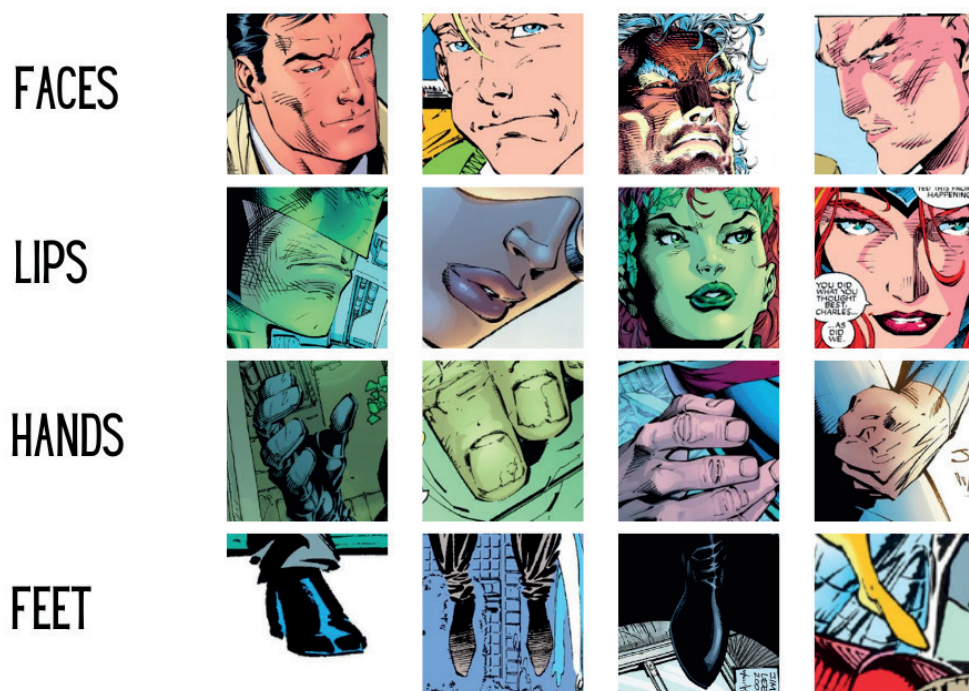


IMAGE 4 – Jim Lee’s “Morellian table”. SOURCES – UNCANNY X-MEN #248 (1989); X-MEN #1 (1991); BATMAN #608-619 (2002-2003).

The elements defining Lee’s style, along with Image 4, will serve as reference points in our

upcoming image generation experiment with Midjourney.

Explorations with Midjourney

We utilized Midjourney AI to recreate Jim Lee's artistic style through an experimental exploration documented via self-observation, recording both the prompts and the generated images. The experiment was conducted in two distinct phases. In the first phase, using version 4 of the model, we generated a corpus of 164 images, seven of which were analyzed in Telles (2023). During this phase, additional elements were incorporated into the prompts—such as “comicbook,” “90s comicbook art,” “dynamic,” “ready for action,” “line drawing,” “color,” and “8k”—to guide the model toward the desired illustrative style. Image 5 presents an example from this phase, showing the result of the following prompt:

superwoman flying, female, comic book heroines, by Jim Lee, comicbook, 90s comicbook art, dynamic, ready for action, line drawing, color, 8k, full body, ar 2:3, --v 4

Including these elements helped guide Midjourney to produce images resembling the artist's style and the “idealist” aesthetic of comics from that era. This included features such as digital coloring, exaggerated muscle definition, idealized body forms, a single central muscle line on the abdomen (more evident in the left image), and even an emulated signature. However, these additions ultimately introduced extraneous elements that “contaminated” the image generation process, hindering true emulation. Consequently, it became necessary to recreate the experiment under revised guidelines.

In the new experiment, using version 5.2 of Midjourney (the latest available at the time of writing¹²), we generated an additional 88 images. Following Salvaggio's (2023) approach, we generated images successively until identifying those that most closely resembled Jim Lee's art style. From this selection, we chose three images to describe in detail, noting both their standout qualities and less significant aspects. For each of these three prompts, we then created a set of additional images, analyzing their strengths and weaknesses in relation to the (assumed) original dataset.



IMAGE 5 – “Superwoman...”. SOURCE – Author.

In the experiment, we opted not to include visual references in the prompt, instead specifying well-known characters to achieve a closer resemblance to existing intellectual property rather than a

12 The latest model at time of reviewing the manuscript was 6.1, launched on July 30, 2024.

generic “Superwoman” (as seen in Image 5, despite the color alignment with Superman). The inclusion of these intellectual properties (IPs) in the dataset partially explains why these models are popular in fan art creation (Lamerichis, 2023). We chose characters previously illustrated by Jim Lee—such as Batman, Catwoman, and Wolverine—to explore the “latent space” of these images and their underlying dataset. The objective was to determine whether the model was indeed trained on Jim Lee’s artwork and, if so, whether it could independently generate images with his distinctive style without manual adjustments.

Following these guidelines, we began by generating a series of Batman images using two different prompts: “Batman, in the style of Jim Lee-style raw” and “Batman, by Jim Lee.” According to Midjourney’s documentation, adding “--style raw” is intended to “reduce the influence of Midjourney’s default aesthetic” and is recommended for advanced users seeking greater control over their images. However, using “style raw” not only failed to eliminate the persistent “default Midjourney aesthetic” (which remains somewhat ambiguous) but also produced images that diverged significantly from Jim Lee’s style. The generated images featured gouache-like textures, abstract brushstrokes, and loose lines (see Image 6)—characteristics contrary to Lee’s precise techniques. In contrast, the second prompt yielded more satisfactory results (see Image 7), one of which was later enlarged (see Image 8).



IMAGE 6 – “Batman, in the style of Jim Lee --style raw”. SOURCE – Author.



IMAGE 7 – “Batman, by Jim Lee”. SOURCE – Author.



IMAGE 8 – “Batman, by Jim Lee” upscaled. SOURCE – Author.

Interestingly, the Batman prompt brings with it an atmospheric sense of mist and rain, despite neither being specified in the prompt. These details appear to reside in the latent space, reinforcing Batman as a dark archetype of the superhero. The generated image (Image 8) exhibits similarities to Jim Lee's style, including well-defined muscles, a compartmentalized abdominal structure, a static pose, and computer-generated colors. Although the facial hatching resembles techniques associated with other artists, such as Frank Quitely, the overall style is reminiscent of Lee's approach. However, to gain a fuller understanding, it's crucial to compare this image with an actual illustration by Lee (see Image 9).

Initially, we noted a sense of familiarity with Lee's style. Yet, when placing the images side by side, the similarities begin to feel unsettling—or, as Freud (2019) describes it, "uncanny." Not only do the digital color gradients differ, but the Midjourney illustration seems to amplify Lee's traits: the muscles appear more exaggerated, the pose even more rigid. Above all, it lacks the dynamism intrinsic to Lee's original illustration.

Additional issues arise when we apply the same method to other characters, such as Wolverine. Although Jim Lee illustrated Wolverine extensively, especially in the late 1980s, significantly influencing the character's look throughout the 1990s and beyond, Midjourney struggles to replicate Lee's distinctive style for this character. Image 10 shows the outcome of the straightforward prompt "Wolverine, by Jim Lee." While this simpler approach yielded satisfactory results for Batman, it proved ineffective for Wolverine. None of the generated images resembles Lee's distinctive techniques (see Image 3 for comparison).



IMAGE 9 – Batman, by Jim Lee. SOURCE – Jim Lee with Scott Williams, *Batman: Hush* (2023).



IMAGE 10 – “Wolverine, by Jim Lee”. SOURCE – Author.

An image that vaguely resembles Jim Lee’s Wolverine emerged only after applying the same additional markers used in the version 4 experiment: “90s comicbook art, dynamic, ready for action, line drawing, color, 8k.” These markers seem to guide the model toward the desired artistic style, though the effects of individual elements remain somewhat ambiguous. For instance, “90s comicbook art” appears to evoke the gouache-like texture¹³ observed in the simpler prompt, while “line drawing” produces black-and-white, sketch-like images. However, combining these elements with the “color” specification results in a style closer to the familiar aesthetic. Moreover, adding “dynamic” and “ready for action” introduces movement into what would otherwise be a static pose. Image 11 illustrates the experiment’s progression in additive stages.

13 The associations made within the dataset here are intriguing and warrant further investigation. Among prominent 1990s comic book artists, only Bill Sienkiewicz (and perhaps Dave McKean) is closely associated with the blurred, watercolor-like gouache style that the system appears to emulate. Another key artist from this period, Alex Ross, also used gouache but in a cleaner style more aligned with classical academic painting standards. Somehow, the distinction between “gouache” and “comics” has—pun intended—blurred the lines between various watercolor painting styles in the dataset.



IMAGE 11 – Clockwise: “Wolverine, by Jim Lee”; adding “90s comicbook art”; adding “line drawing”; adding “color”; finally, with “ready for action, dynamic” added (larger image). SOURCE – Author.

These markers reveal the inner workings of prompt logic, allowing us to treat theme, technique, iconography, and other attributes as distinct parameters. This approach enables the separation of historical and contemporary, collective and individual forms of representation from their original contexts of time, place, and authorship (Meyer, 2023). Consequently, “style” for the machine encompasses not only traditional notions of historical art styles or the individual style of a canonized artist but also the aesthetic qualities found in popular culture products and the visual traits linked to specific genres and media formats (Meyer, 2023). As a result, styles are no longer bound to individual creators—even in collective representations—but transform into codified patterns that can be continually accessed and reinterpreted within the model’s dataset, embodying the concept of “datafication” (Mejias & Couldry, 2019).

The next two experiments explored Morelli’s idea that features like lips and nails reveal subtle, often imperceptible details of an artist’s style. In Image 4, we present examples of lips and nails drawn by Jim Lee—small but telling details that contribute to his artistic signature. Our approach involved assessing how effectively Midjourney could replicate these features. Once again, the model struggled with concise prompts such as “woman’s lips, by Jim Lee” and “a hand, by Jim Lee.” Some of the images in Image 12 display a variety of lip styles, none resembling those found in Lee’s female characters (see Image 4). The results for hands and nails are even more intriguing: Midjourney generated images across various artistic styles, often featuring a more organic or grotesque aesthetic, which contrasts sharply with Lee’s characteristic idealism and the dominant style in comics (see also Image 12).

However, when we guided the model with additional parameters, including “90s comicbook art,” “dynamic,” “ready for action,” “line drawing,” and “color,” it produced illustrations that more closely aligned with Lee’s style, even when the image itself was neither dynamic nor “ready for action” (see Image 13). Notable details include the full, rounded lips, the shading (hatching) on the sides of the face and above the mouth, eye placement, and the definition of the nose by the outline of the tip alone. Comparing this face with those in Image 4, the stylistic resemblance is striking—yet not entirely identical. An underlying sense of the “uncanny” remains.



IMAGE 12 – Hands, nails, faces, and lips “by Jim Lee”. SOURCE – Author.



IMAGE 13 – A female face resembling Lee's art. SOURCE – Author.

The face in Image 13 offers valuable insights into the concept of artistic style. First, it demonstrates that, despite comic artists’ understandable concerns about the use of their work in model training, merely invoking an artist’s name does not guarantee images that are unmistakably in their style. In other tests, artists like Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Klimt, Van Gogh, and Picasso yielded more accurate stylistic matches, likely due to the highly distinctive nature of their styles. In contrast, commercial artists often operate within stylistic and standard constraints that align them more closely with their peers. As a result, their styles tend to be both less individually distinctive and more readily replicable.

Jim Lee is frequently cited as an artist who inspired many imitators, yet in a commercial industry like comics, the relative uniformity in graphic style serves a specific purpose. This suggests that, although the machine cannot perfectly replicate Lee’s art, the standardization within the comic industry mirrors the standardization found in AI model databases. When an industry prioritizes similarity over uniqueness—a commercially identifiable pattern over a distinctive artistic voice—the convergence between commercial

and machinic standardization carries disruptive potential.

The current obstacle, ironically, is the technological challenge of achieving consistency. Among prompt designers, the most sought-after goal is to achieve “consistency”—generating a series of images that not only replicate the same style but also depict the same character with uniform levels of detail. This is a skill that, thus far, only human artists have mastered. However, it seems to be only a matter of time before this gap is closed. Overcoming this technological barrier could be the turning point for the comic industry to seriously consider the use of machine illustrators.

The American comic industry has a longstanding history of exploiting creative talent, often regarding creators as replaceable and disposable (Beaty, 2012). For publishers in this sector—as well as other entertainment companies focused on content production—preserving the corporate trademark takes precedence over supporting individual artistic contributions. Generative AI introduces the potential to produce new material directly, rapidly, and with a disposable quality, bypassing personal (human) considerations, such as artists’ ambitions and deadlines. As Beaty (2012, p. 96) observes, “comics operate[s] as an entertainment engine, churning out stories in which individual actors were easily replaced.”

Gardner (2011, as cited in Brown, 2023) emphasizes that what distinguishes comics from novels and films is the drawn line on paper, an expression of the artist’s hand that plays a fundamental role in creating meaning within the medium. This line embodies the illustrator’s recognizable personality and serves as a measure of artistic merit. But what occurs when this line is “drawn” by a machine? While the style produced by Midjourney evokes 1990s comics and, to some degree, Jim Lee, it simultaneously carries an *Unheimliche* quality—an uncanny, unsettling sensation (Freud, 2019). Is this discomfort due to our unease with the absence of an identifiable artist’s signature in machine-generated images, or is it the inherently mechanical nature of these signatures? Are we perhaps witnessing something entirely new—a “default Midjourney aesthetic,” a machinic signature for comic art, or even a new industrial process for producing these stories?

Conclusion

This article examined the relationship between human creativity in commercial graphic art and generative artificial intelligence, specifically focusing on the attempt to replicate the style of comic illustrator Jim Lee using Midjourney AI. The research employed a mixed-methods approach, incorporating self-observation of the author’s interactions with the AI, analysis of the AI’s processes, and evaluation of the generated outputs. Jim Lee was selected as the study’s subject due to his prominence in the comic book industry and his “idealistic” style, widely regarded as a standard within the superhero genre. The research followed the AI analysis framework proposed by Munn et al. (2023), addressing the dimensions of “Undoing the Ecosystem,” “Undoing the Data,” and “Undoing the Output.”

The attempt to replicate Lee’s style with generative AI faced significant challenges. Even when generated images resembled Lee’s style, they largely remained “uncanny.” This highlighted the complexity of replicating an artist’s style, even when their name is used as a command for the AI. Nonetheless, the imitation is “good enough.” In an industry where standardization is the norm, the convergence between the comic industry’s commercial standards and machinic standards holds disruptive potential.

For now, artistic creativity retains a distinctive and personal quality that resists full replication through technology. However, generative AI is advancing rapidly and may one day represent a significant shift in how commercial art is produced and perceived. This is an area where ethical, legal, and cultural considerations will become increasingly relevant as technology continues to evolve. This brief analysis, therefore, underscores the need for a deeper understanding of the cultural and social implications of AI in commercial graphic art and human creativity.

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