

Trending Today, Forgotten Tomorrow: The Ephemerality of AI-Generated Art on Civitai

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In early 2024, the Willy Wonka Experience in Glasgow became infamous for its lackluster execution. Promised an immersive adventure, visitors instead encountered a dark, poorly decorated warehouse with minimal set design and dubious use of AI-generated visuals.¹ Guests, and soon the internet at large, criticized the event for its lack of effort and creativity. While initially amusing, this uninspired production could be indicative of a broader trend: the rapid, superficial production of content driven by generative AI and the consequences of overreliance on AI without thoughtful human input.

Generative AI — referring to artificial intelligence systems that can create new content like images, text, or videos by training on large datasets — have seen wide adoption. These tools, like DALL-E, Midjourney, Stable Diffusion, and Adobe Firefly, allow users to input prompts and receive creative, often complex, results with minimal effort. The platforms offer varying levels of accessibility, from free open-source models to subscription-based services, making them widely available and easy to use. As of

¹ Calum Watson, Morven Mckinnon, and Megan Bonar, “Willy Wonka experience: How did the viral sensation go so wrong?” *BBC*, March 2, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-glasgow-west-68431728>.

mid-2024, Midjourney had over 20 million users on Discord.² ChatGPT had an average of 1.5 billion monthly visits in 2023.³

While this technology may help to broaden access to content creation, it has also introduced an era of disposability, where the overwhelming volume of output overshadows lasting impact. This is particularly evident in online galleries like Civitai, a platform launched in November 2022 that serves as a showcase for AI-generated art. While Civitai's community-driven approach and accessible resources make it popular, its emphasis on speed and novelty — the site boasts that users generate up to 10 million images a day — seem to prioritize momentary appeal over enduring value.⁴

In September 2024, Civitai's trending image page demonstrated its quick shifts in popular content and user interests. The platform's bend toward unconventionality was evident in a single day's most popular prompt: a bizarrely buff Smeagol from *Lord of the Rings*, mid-workout in a gym.⁵ The image is a weird, unexpected combination that captures immediate attention. The most-reacted to image of that week featured a female warrior hurling a fiery meteorite, while the monthly favorite showed a cyberpunk character in a retro-futuristic, dystopian setting.^{6,7} Both highlight the community's appetite for specific, complex, and striking imagery. The all-time most reacted-to prompt combines maximalist fantasy with pop culture, blending elements of cosplay, video games, and hyper-detailed traits — intricate, weathered, and atmospheric — perfectly capturing Civitai's inclination towards genre-defying imagery.⁸

These rapidly changing trends exemplify Civitai's tendency toward novelty and immediate visual gratification. While each prompt represents creativity in its

² Midjourney Discord invitation screen, showing current member statistics, <https://discord.com/invite/midjourney>.

³ Krystal Hu, "Booming traffic for OpenAI's ChatGPT posts first-ever monthly dip in June," *Reuters*, July 5, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/technology/booming-traffic-openais-chatgpt-posts-first-ever-monthly-dip-june-similarweb-2023-07-05/>.

⁴ "Using Civitai: The On-Site Image Generator," Civitai, <https://education.civitai.com/using-civitai-the-on-site-image-generator/>.

⁵ User @UnstableGen's exact prompt was "a ridiculously buff, roided-out Smeagol wearing a sleeveless hoodie, curling a massive dumbbell in a realistic gym setting," shared to Civitai September 14, 2024, <https://civitai.com/images/29438139>.

⁶ @dever's complex prompt began with "intensely focused Viking woman warrior with curly hair hurling a burning meteorite from her hand towards the viewer," shared to Civitai September 10, 2024, <https://civitai.com/images/28746697>.

⁷ @LizardMan245's long prompt started with "the image is a digital illustration in a detailed, vibrant, high contrast, semi-realistic art style with 90s retro futuristic anime elements without noise or comic halftone effect," shared to Civitai September 4, 2024, <https://civitai.com/images/27763004>.

⁸ @ajuro's prompt had mention of specific franchises and characters, including *Atomic Heart* and *Final Fantasy*, as well as negative prompts, including bad proportions, ugly, and extra fingers, shared to Civitai March 2024, <https://civitai.com/images/9173928>.

conception, or perhaps more accurately, a proficiency in prompt engineering, the continual cycle of different styles and themes results in a fast-paced environment where viral hits disappear as quickly as they emerged. Moreover, the pieces in the online gallery often lack the personal connection or story that gives traditional art its lasting value. Rather than being shaped by an artist's unique perspective or life experience, these images are the result of specific keywords and phrases, often lacking the depth and personal touch that gives traditional art its profound effects.

The surrealist trend seen throughout Civitai parallels the work of traditional artists like James Jean, whose ethereal portraits blend natural forms with dreamlike elements.⁹ Jean's art, marked by its intricate details, underscores the rich, labor-intensive process behind his traditional creative practices. On Instagram, Jean shared that most of his sketches alone take about a day to complete.¹⁰ This time investment starkly contrasts with AI's ability to generate hundreds of images in minutes. The use of generative AI, often without thoughtful consideration, risks trivializing the time, skill, and personal experience that have traditionally shaped artistic expression.

It's important to note, however, that AI-generated imagery isn't entirely without merit. Some creatives may use this technology as a tool for artistic exploration, incorporating generated elements into broader, more considered works. In these cases, AI acts as a collaborator, augmenting rather than replacing the human's role. When AI supports, but doesn't overshadow their process, creators can achieve impactful and thoughtful results.

Still, the overwhelming trend toward ephemerality on Civitai raises important questions about the future of creativity and long-term implications. As AI-generated content becomes increasingly prevalent, how will it shape our perception of art and human creativity? Will the flood of easily created, trend-driven visuals devalue the time, skill, and craftsmanship typically associated with art-making? Conversely, could the rapid obsolescence of AI-generated images — with their tendency to be quickly forgotten — paradoxically preserve the enduring value of traditional artistic practices?

The rise of generative AI and platforms like Civitai present complex challenges. While they expand access to creation and open new modes of visual expression, they also risk promoting a culture where art is seen as easily consumable and quickly disposable. As we address these complexities, it's important to consider how we

⁹ Jamie Green, "James Jean's phantasmagorical world of technicolour fever dreams," *It's Nice That*, August 18, 2016, <https://www.itsnicethat.com/articles/james-jean-zugzwang-phantasmagorical-paintings-180816>.

¹⁰ Jean shared an intricate sketch based on a photo from his travels, accompanied only by a teapot emoji. In response to a comment, he noted that most of his sketches take about a day to complete. Instagram, September 7, 2023, https://www.instagram.com/p/C_nz_hVvoRG/?hl=en.

engage with AI while still preserving the depth, longevity, and human touch that have long made art a vital part of our cultural heritage.

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