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Editorial: Design Research During and After Artificial Intelligence

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Abstract: The shift in design research caused by the escalation of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is taking considerable space in the field. In a mixture of potential and undeniable risks, we looked for a blend of critique and practice, of analysis and foresight. In the set of papers to be published, we see a span of precisely that: reflexive re-orientations in the evaluation of what AI is doing to design, mirrored in current practices; and speculations on the after (en)during AI. In this editorial, we contextualize the research in the world it was produced in, exposing the during that unfolded hand-in-hand with it. We then describe the content of the corpus of papers, followed by the aftermath we hope for, including what we expect the design research community undoubtedly should discuss.

Keywords: Design Research, Artificial Intelligence, Hype Cycles, Critical Discourse

Introduction: The World as it was During the Track Formation

This track was conceived by us (Matthew Lee-Smith, Jesse Josua Benjamin, Mafalda Gamboa, Stephan Wensveen) in early 2025, submitted in July, and then accepted in August. The track opened for submissions in October, with an eventual submission count of 90 full papers. As the only track with the term “AI” in the title, this was to be expected, and at least we were not faced with an onslaught of actual slop, such as NeurIPS¹. Through desk rejections and track shifts due to scope (e.g., where AI technologies were more directly applied in a domain), we eventually passed 43 papers into the review phase, out of which 11 were accepted. After gaining 1 submission from another track, these made up the 12 papers representing our track.

To start this editorial with a somewhat pedantic, navel-gazing record struck us as necessary, as the world has changed in ways that the long meandering arcs of academia cannot really

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/dec/06/ai-research-papers>, accessed 24/04/2026.



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trace. During this time, things started to fall apart and seem to still be falling. A reminder of some of the things related to AI happening along the way, in an entirely non-exhaustive fashion, brings this home. A week before the authors submitted, Pope Leo XIV recommended clergy use AI technologies to spread the gospel² (then later urged priests to refrain from using it to generate sermons³). One day before we began drafting this editorial, OpenAI announced the shutdown of its video generation platform Sora after only months of hype, abuse-filled content creation, and billion-dollar deals⁴. In the days since, AI-generated, high-grade meme material is being weaponized in geopolitical conflicts⁵, and Palantir has published a brazen manifesto⁶. Perhaps this is just a bump in the road, or perhaps the milk has soured, exposed to too much summer heat. We've seen AI winters and summers aplenty, and these cycles correspond with global, local, and individual crises. What have we achieved with this track in view of all this? We intended there to be a space for considerate design research work which pointed at the potential for careful technological engagement through designerly sensibilities—providing a seedbed for how things could be.

What is in This Track

The rapid—albeit not inevitable—proliferation of artificial intelligence in design has reproduced narratives of acceleration and augmentation we have seen before. Yet the papers in this track suggest that such framings are already insufficient. They go beyond treating AI as a tool or collaborator; they relate to what it means to conduct design research with contested and likely problematic intelligences, and what they do to us as designers. Across twelve papers, there is a tension between regarding AI as a site of possibility and AI as a site of erosion. Our original call considered design during *and* after AI, and in these papers, that *after* is seen as epistemological rather than chronological, perhaps more of an afterthought than an aftermath.

The neutrality of the instrument is questioned across the papers, recognizing yet another old as time iteration of the entanglement between human and machine cognition (Ranpura 2026), particularly when considering co-creative processes in identity design and industrial practice (Eser and Altiparmakogullari 2026). This calls into question where the expertise lies and how much of design practice has become about orchestrating non-human contributions in distributed ecologies of agency (Figoli *et al.* 2026). As many of these outputs are unpredictable and opaque, both uncertainty (Theelen *et al.* 2026) and the certainty of central convergence are material conditions of designing with probabilistic systems. Many of these papers investigate design at its own sites of identity (De Luca and Berns 2026): the studio and the practice.

² <https://www.usccb.org/news/2025/pope-leo-xiv-urges-catholic-technologists-spread-gospel-ai>, accessed 24/04/2026.

³ <https://www.ncronline.org/vatican/pope-leo-tells-priests-not-use-ai-write-homilies-or-look-like-tiktok>, accessed 24/04/2026.

⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c3w3e467ewqo>, accessed 24/02/2026.

⁵ <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cjd8jrd1vnyo>, accessed 24/04/2026.

⁶ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c4gikj7975po>, accessed 29/04/2026.

The papers in this track reiterate what was somewhat already part of the transition in design practice from authorship to mediation. Designers are seen as “critical reflectors” and “bridge-builders” (Budihardjo *et al.* 2026), intervening in AI systems that reproduce structural inequalities. But this does not guarantee a stable position for the designer. Speculative and practice-based inquiries—such as those exploring analogy, more-than-human practices of decentring (Giaccardi *et al.* 2026), vibe coding (Nold 2026), or agentic AI in domestic life (Moon 2026)—suggest that designers are in troubled waters.

While much of the discourse surrounding AI is oriented towards scale, efficiency, optimization, and standardization, several papers articulate counter-imaginaries. The notion of “Small AI” (Bendor *et al.* 2026), for instance, proposes a degrowth-oriented approach that counter-acts extractivist models of data and computation, asking what it would mean to design *less*, more locally, and more responsibly with AI?

Similarly, theoretical contributions drawing on empathy (Sinclair and Buwert 2026), alterity, and hauntology (Heron *et al.* 2026) complicate these progress narratives. AI is described as a cultural and philosophical condition—one that raises questions about otherness, memory, and the persistence of past worlds within present outputs. Generative systems are archives that recombine traces of human production, often without acknowledgement or accountability, or in fact, deep critical assessment.

The question remains: after AI, or within it? This body of work suggests that we may already be beyond the point where AI can be treated as an external phenomenon to design, but how design itself is reconstituted as an ongoing relationship in already existing lived experiences.

What is Left, What is Missing?

And yet, the “after” in this track seems unfulfilled, remaining as a provocation. We meant to ask design researchers to imagine futures in which current trajectories are not inevitable, to see an alternative or even the end of AI, at least in its current hyper-focused on large-scale GenAI form. But we seem not yet to be there, despite plenty of signs of the bubble bursting, and the evidence that “[t]he experiences and fantasies of straight teenage boys and immature young men have played a depressingly large part in the development of computer technology” (Blackwell 2024, p. 167).

As we could almost predict, what connects these contributions is a commitment to interrogating assumptions and consequences. Design research is here poised as a form of experimentation, exposure, and speculation; searching for unsettling and rejecting stabilization. Yet, as with many of the previous “advances” in technology, be it the internet, social media, big data, blockchains, and virtual reality, the following quote still stings:

“Various design schools and studios, for instance, felt the urge to equip themselves with ~~virtual reality~~ **Artificial Intelligence** setups (an interest recently revived by ~~Mark Zuckerberg’s metaverse~~ **Sam Altman’s Artificial General Intelligence** propaganda). Students and staff now ‘experiment’ with ~~VR AI~~, but their work often acts like an ornament for the technology itself. **They try to engage with the medium, but the medium prevails.** As in the platform’s conceptual grid, the work of designers becomes mere content.” (Lorusso 2023, p. 189, emphasis and strikethroughs added)

Over how many decades and through how many “new” technologies has and will the medium, and those who control it, continue to prevail?

The AI Spectacle

What transpired through this process is quite notably a friction between our intentions with this track and what we achieved (what did we achieve?). Design is seemingly stuck in a standstill—still aiming for either intellectual protest, or a capitulation to technological development (as if) beyond our control. Possibly, design as a discipline is too tame and comfortable to be filling the Molotov cocktails (or their digital equivalent) to aim at datacenters, even if we are against the current developments. The Butlerian Jihad is engineered, not designed. The Luddites knew how to hold the Enoch hammers. The computer scientists are poisoning the well⁷ while designers fail to create tools they can control in a meaningful way, to support going beyond critique towards action. Riots and revolutions need an understanding of the paradox of “peaceful protest”. Design research continues situating itself in the peaceful protesting of critique. Outside academia, we see several initiatives making the “user experience” of resistance attainable in the spirit of neo-Luddites through simple techniques such as placing traffic cones on self-driving cars in San Francisco to disrupt them, or straight up standing in front of last-mile delivery robots. Academic critique in the face of this is arguably the weakest form of peaceful protest, as it creates very little inconvenience to anyone, anywhere.

Every GenAI advert shows us that the midwives of these products have no idea what to do with them. Every new disturbing phenomenon (AI Psychosis, Token Anxiety, Hooked Models) shows that GenAI is not living up to its utopic narrative. Every example of a GenAI beating a benchmark is debunked when it makes contact with reality.

The adage bits are cheap, atoms are expensive has been (further) proven for the fallacy it always was; bits are atoms, and now they are (even more) expensive, rare-earth atoms sitting in gigantic racks of atoms, cooled by atoms, trained with atoms rearranged by exploited (atom-based) people. This fallacy could very well be the current AI boom’s undoing, with the cost and time associated with building datacentres, the rapid obsolescence of GPUs, and the cost of training, post-training, and inference/token burn eventually eating through all its props.

What do we have to show for all of this effort? We are creating a masticated enshitified, bullshitified, banalified monoculture. Nature releases an exhausted laugh and scoffs, “something mechanical encrusted on the living” (Bergson 1913, p. 37). We must geoengineer a winter. Yet this time, an AI winter runs the risk of taking us all down with it. This time, it is not academic funding, or companies, or discussions of cybernetics vs artificial intelligence that will be undone by the fall, but possibly much of our economies.

Frustratingly, most discourse surrounding AI seems to be aligning itself to a “Society of the Spectacle” (Debord 1994). AI seems to thrive in scale, even when we know we should be turning to understanding what the smaller and less spectacular versions of it we actually need. The present AI fever that we feed with this track is a grand theatre in which the image of intelligence circulates with far greater force than the intelligence itself. These machines

⁷ <https://www.poisonfountain.org/> accessed 27/04/2026

that perform fluency and awe, haunted oracles, staged faith in mechanical futures that consistently fall short; without a bubble bursting, rather oozing itself empty at the hands of underpaid workers keeping up the illusion of that spectacle.

We're not angry, we're just disappointed.

When we put this track together, it was meant as an opportunity for people to present what they were doing with AI, where they thought AI was going, and, crucially, imagining a world beyond, or even without, AI at this moment in time. Yet, whilst all the papers in this track are meaningful and genuinely interesting, none of them presents a radical or blasphemous vision of design or artificial intelligence. They provoke safely. Our pearls remain unclutched. We are disappointed in everyone, most of all ourselves. The axles of the bandwagon have snapped, and we are all guilty. Many may not want to even talk about AI anymore, and yet, as researchers and designers with a passion for engaging in the world, we cannot look away, we cannot stay silent. But where were the papers on designing against psychosis? Speculating on a world where AI received the same fate as human cloning (for now, but who knows)? Describing the criminal trials of Sam Altman and his ilk? Designing campaigns to send to local representatives?

What is to be done then?

Conclusion

This editorial is perhaps a challenge to question the continuation of the AI spectacle at the conference itself. What can we, or are we willing to do as design researchers? In the words of Brian Merchant, author of *"Blood in the Machine"*, on why the AI backlash has turned violent:

"If you take at face value what the AI executives themselves have been saying for the last decade, that an AI powerful enough to make humans go extinct is nascent, then acting with force to stop it would be a rational action."⁸

This then highlights how many of us are acting in a way that would imply that we do not believe in the hype as advertised, even when we say we do. Or perchance we believe we are safe, and this is something that we can have views on, but will ultimately happen to someone else.

While we can maintain order and refrain from explicit calls to violence, what we find important is to cease the vicarious (and perhaps addictive) feeding of the machine without the involvement of a rational re-assessment of the role of design as a well-oiled cogwheel inside it. How can we prevail over the medium? Inside, outside, and around the content of the papers under this editorial, we hope there is plenty of space for these actions and conversations to happen without necessarily converting into more written work.

⁸ <https://www.bloodinthemachine.com/p/why-the-ai-backlash-has-turned-violent> accessed 25/04/2026

We call for:

We put forward several calls to action to the DRS community and beyond to not just critique AI but to fight it and bring about change through more traffic cones and less academic tomes. We call for:

- Predominantly smaller AI that is not datacenter-dependent and focused on local-scale devices. Models need to be able to run on mainstream hardware and be open to all.
- Large-scale AI must be nationalized and used for public good, not profit-driven ends. We must have a say on what can be trained and why, and what constitutes sufficient improvement to justify the resources needed.
- More active resistance and revolution from the design community, ourselves included.
- A moratorium on saying that AI is inevitable. Language and belief matter; if we all keep saying it is inevitable, then it will be.

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Mafalda Gamboa is about to finish her PhD in interaction design at Chalmers University of Technology. Her work is centred on design theory, albeit loaded with instigatory sensibilities.

Stephan Wensveen is full professor of 'Constructive Design Research in Smart Products, Services and Systems' at Industrial Design (TU/e). After co-introducing the notion of 'aesthetics of interaction' in the 2000's, he is developing a larger program around 'aesthetics of intelligence.'