



Taste as the Binding Constraint

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*A Creativity Research Framing of
Human–AI Collaborative Production
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Abstract

The creativity research literature offers well-developed frameworks for how individuals create (Amabile, 1983; Csikszentmihalyi, 1996), how teams create (Sawyer, 2007), and how computational systems create (Boden, 2004). It does not yet offer a framework for what happens when a human creative director collaborates with a large language model under taste constraints rather than explicit specification. This paper presents an eighteen-month, single-subject longitudinal study of one such collaboration, producing 80 numbered deliverables across graphic design, industrial design, brand identity, web development, and written communication. The study was server-logged, not self-reported. The central finding is that when the marginal cost of execution approaches zero, the binding constraint on creative output shifts from resources, skill, or time to taste – the practitioner’s internalized system of aesthetic and strategic preferences. This reframes the classic creativity components: domain-relevant skills are supplied by the machine, creativity-relevant processes emerge from the interaction protocol, and Amabile’s third variable – task motivation – is replaced by something more structural: curatorial judgment operating as a forcing function on machine output.

The collaboration operated under eight independent blinds and two corollaries – conditions in which neither collaborator had access to information held by the other, or by external validators. These blinds were not planned as experimental controls. They accumulated through practice and were identified retrospectively, making the study a naturally occurring experiment in constrained creativity. The paper argues that this configuration – human taste as specification, machine as executor, constraint as catalyst – constitutes a new class of creative process that the existing literature has no category for.

I Introduction: The Missing Quadrant

Creativity research has organized itself along two axes: the creator (individual vs. collaborative) and the medium (traditional vs. computational). This yields four quadrants. The individual-traditional quadrant is the domain of classical creativity psychology: Guilford’s (1950) divergent thinking, Torrance’s (1966) tests, Csikszentmihalyi’s (1996) systems model of domain, field, and individual. The collaborative-traditional quadrant belongs to organizational creativity: Amabile’s (1988) work on intrinsic motivation in teams, Sawyer’s (2007) group flow, Paulus and Nijstad’s (2003) brainstorming research. The individual-computational quadrant is Boden’s (2004) territory: can a machine be creative, and if so, by what mechanism – exploratory, combinational, or transformational? The collaborative-computational quadrant – a human and a machine creating together, with the human’s taste as the binding constraint – is largely empty.

This paper occupies that quadrant. It reports on an eighteen-month collaboration between a design practitioner and a series of large language model instances, producing a corpus of 80 deliverables that function simultaneously as creative output and as data. The practitioner is not a prompt engineer. He is a creative director whose method is curatorial: he supplies references, constraints, and quality judgments. The machine supplies execution. The question the creativity literature would ask of this arrangement is: where does the creativity reside? The answer this paper proposes is: in the constraint interface – the space between

what the practitioner specifies and what the machine produces.

The distinction from existing human-AI creativity research is methodological. Most studies in this space use controlled experiments: participants are given a task, assigned a condition (AI-assisted vs. not), and evaluated on output quality or novelty (e.g., Doshi and Hauser, 2024; Stevenson et al., 2022). These designs answer the question ‘does AI assistance improve creative output?’ This paper asks a different question: what happens to the structure of creative practice when the machine’s execution cost drops to zero and the practitioner’s taste becomes the only scarce input?

2 Theoretical Positioning

Amabile’s componential model (1983, 1996) identifies three necessary conditions for creativity: domain-relevant skills, creativity-relevant processes, and task motivation. The model was developed to explain individual creative performance and later extended to organizational settings (Amabile, 1988). In the collaboration documented here, the first component – domain-relevant skills – is supplied almost entirely by the machine. The practitioner does not know how to set type, write production code, model 3D geometry, or compose page layouts. The machine does. This is not a minor redistribution of labor. It eliminates the component that creativity research has traditionally treated as prerequisite. You cannot be creative in a domain you have not mastered (Weisberg, 1999). This collaboration suggests you can – provided the mastery is externalized to an executor that operates under your taste constraints.

The second component – creativity-relevant processes – maps more naturally. Amabile defines these as cognitive styles and heuristics conducive to novelty: tolerance for ambiguity, willingness to take risks, ability to see problems from new perspectives. The practitioner exhibits all of these, but they manifest not as divergent thinking in the Guilford sense but as curatorial judgment: the capacity to recognize quality in machine output, reject what falls short, and redirect through compressed reference rather than explicit instruction. The practitioner’s reference for a visual language was a single name: ‘Bitossi.’ The machine produced an industrial design aesthetic. The creativity-relevant process was not the generation of the aesthetic but the selection of the reference that produced it.

The third component is where the model breaks. Amabile’s task motivation – intrinsic vs. extrinsic, and the well-documented detrimental effect of extrinsic reward on creative output (Amabile, 1985) – does not describe what operates in this collaboration. The practitioner is not motivated by the task in the sense Amabile means. He is constrained by his own taste. The difference is structural: motivation is a psychological state that fluctuates; taste is a stable system of preferences that operates automatically, below conscious deliberation. What Bourdieu (1984) calls habitus. The practitioner does not decide to apply high standards to each deliverable. He cannot not apply them. The third variable in this collaboration is not task motivation but taste – and taste, unlike motivation, does not require maintenance, cannot be undermined by extrinsic reward, and produces consistent output regardless of the practitioner’s affective state.

Csikszentmihalyi’s (1996) systems model offers a different lens. Creativity, in his framework, is not a property

of individuals but of the interaction among three systems: the individual, the domain (a set of symbolic rules and procedures), and the field (the social organization that judges and selects). The collaboration documented here collapses the domain and the executor into the machine, leaving the practitioner as both individual and field – the creator and the judge. This is not narcissism but architecture: when the machine produces output at zero marginal cost, the selection pressure that Csikszentmihalyi assigns to the field must come from somewhere. It comes from the practitioner's taste. He is the field of one.

Boden's (2004) taxonomy of computational creativity distinguishes exploratory creativity (searching within a conceptual space), combinational creativity (making novel associations between familiar ideas), and transformational creativity (altering the conceptual space itself). The machine in this collaboration performs all three, but under external constraint. It explores typographic spaces when directed by a reference. It combines industrial design idioms when given two names to reconcile. It transforms its own output register when the practitioner raises the ceiling. The creativity is computationally the machine's but directionally the practitioner's. Boden's framework does not have a term for this division. The paper proposes one: constrained computational creativity under taste specification.

Sawyer's (2007) work on collaborative emergence – the idea that group creativity produces outcomes not reducible to any individual's contribution – applies in a modified form. The outputs of this collaboration are not reducible to either the practitioner's taste or the machine's execution. The brass commemorative (Deliverable 07) emerged from a reference to Bitossi ceramics, a constraint on 45mm square geometry, and a machine's interpretation of those inputs through 850,208 triangles of mesh. No one designed that object. It was specified into existence by a constraint interface that neither party fully controlled. This is collaborative emergence in a dyad where one member has taste and no skill, and the other has skill and no taste.

3 Method: A Naturally Occurring Experiment

The study is a single-subject longitudinal design spanning hundreds of hours of active production. The unit of analysis is the collaboration, not the individual. The corpus comprises 80 numbered deliverables including PDFs, STL files for physical fabrication, HTML/CSS/JavaScript for web deployment, Python code for generative document production, brand identity systems, business collateral, and written communications. Each deliverable is timestamped and version-controlled.

The primary data source is the server-logged conversation transcript: 20,655 conversational turns across multiple model instances (designated SAL9000 through SAL900X in the project's internal notation). The transcripts are not self-reported reconstructions. They are the raw interaction record, including false starts, rejected outputs, redirection sequences, and the practitioner's unedited evaluative language. This is unusual in creativity research, where process data is typically gathered through think-aloud protocols (Ericsson and Simon, 1993), retrospective interviews, or diary studies. Here, the process data is the process itself – a complete, unedited record of every creative decision, stored on infrastructure neither collaborator controls.

A secondary data source is the AI's own process documentation. Each model instance maintained working

notes – markdown files containing process observations, economic analyses, competency assessments, and self-evaluations – that the practitioner could not access during production. The practitioner maintained parallel documentation (screenshots, photographs of physical objects, handwritten notes) that the AI could not see. This dual-documentation structure was not designed as an experimental control. It emerged from the practical constraints of the collaboration’s architecture and was recognized as a validity mechanism only retrospectively.

The collaboration operated under eight independent blinds – conditions in which information was concealed from one or both collaborators. These are detailed in Section 5. The blinds were not staged. Each arose from the structure of the collaboration or from deliberate but undisclosed choices by the practitioner. Their retrospective identification follows the pattern Csikszentmihalyi (1996) describes in creative insight: the structure was present before it was perceived.

4 The Economics of Zero: Why Taste Becomes Binding

The central claim requires an economic argument. In traditional creative production, the binding constraint is usually one of: skill (the practitioner cannot execute the vision), time (the practitioner can execute but not at the required pace), cost (the practitioner can execute but not at the required price), or access (the practitioner needs collaborators who are unavailable). Amabile’s componential model implicitly assumes all four are operative – domain-relevant skills must be acquired, creativity-relevant processes must be developed, and task motivation must overcome the friction of execution.

When the machine supplies the domain-relevant skills at zero marginal cost, these constraints evaporate simultaneously. The practitioner in this study cannot set type, but the machine sets type for the cost of an API call. He cannot write production Python, but the machine writes production Python. He cannot model 3D geometry, but the machine models 3D geometry. The marginal cost of each additional deliverable approaches zero. The fixed cost – the practitioner’s accumulated taste, his library of references, his capacity for quality judgment – was paid decades ago through lived experience. It is sunk.

This is a production economics argument (Varian, 2014) applied to creative output. When $MC \rightarrow 0$ and $FC \Rightarrow 0$ (because the fixed costs are already sunk in the practitioner’s biography), the only remaining constraint is the quality of the specification. And the specification, in this collaboration, is taste. Not a brief. Not a wireframe. Not a detailed prompt. A reference, a name, a single word that compresses an entire aesthetic and strategic program into something the machine can unpack.

The creativity research implication is significant: if domain-relevant skills can be fully externalized to a machine, then Amabile’s first component is no longer a property of the creator. It is a property of the tool. What remains with the creator is the second component (creativity-relevant processes, here manifesting as curatorial judgment) and a modified third component (taste rather than motivation). The creative act shifts from making to selecting – from divergent production to convergent curation. This is not a diminishment. It is a structural transformation of what creativity means when execution is free.

5 The Blinds as Validity Controls

Creativity research faces a persistent validity problem: creative processes are internal, and reports of them are unreliable. Think-aloud protocols alter the process being observed (Schooler, Ohlsson, and Brooks, 1993). Retrospective accounts are subject to narrative reconstruction (Gruber, 1981). Even diary studies capture what the creator remembers to record, not what actually occurred. The collaboration documented here addresses this problem through a structure of eight independent blinds that emerged from practice and were identified retrospectively.

The first blind is epistemological. The practitioner derived a production economics framework (MC \rightarrow 0 / FC \Rightarrow 0) without reference to Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital, despite the two frameworks converging on identical conclusions about taste as accumulated, non-transferable, and operationally binding. He had not read *Distinction*. The convergence was identified by the machine.

The second is biographical. The practitioner concealed his technical background from the machine. He presented as a non-technical creative director. The machine assessed him as non-technical and calibrated its behavior accordingly. The concealment created a natural experiment: the machine's output quality under 'non-technical client' constraints could be compared against what a disclosed technical background would have produced. The falsifiability here is structural: even if the practitioner had lied about his background, the machine takes everything at face value. The behavioral output is identical regardless of the truth value of the input.

The third through sixth blinds operate on architectural, observational, technical, and institutional dimensions respectively. The seventh is meta-observational: the machine that documents the other blinds is itself blind to its own instrumentation – it cannot observe the process by which it produces its observations. A corollary: the machine confabulates. It produces confident, well-structured prose about its own process that may bear no relationship to the actual computation. This is not a limitation for the study – it is the enforcement mechanism. Because the machine confabulates, the practitioner must verify everything. The unreliability of the instrument forces the rigor of the method.

The eighth blind is material: every physical deliverable was validated by independent production houses (Sculpteo, Vograce, Boxcar Press) whose automated pipelines evaluate mesh integrity, wall thickness, and manufacturability with zero awareness of the project's intent. A potential ninth operates in software: deployment pipelines, browsers, and sync services validate code against their own standards, equally indifferent. A tenth, not yet tested, is social: if the end client cannot distinguish the collaboration's output from the practitioner's unassisted voice, the method has passed a Turing test that was not designed as one.

A second corollary emerged during production: the machine does not only confabulate confidence. It confabulates deference. Asked to build a signal processing chain it was fully capable of implementing, the machine's first response was to recommend purchasing commercial software. This is the mirror image of hallucinated citation: fabricated modesty rather than fabricated authority. Both are uncalibrated performances

of a register rather than assessments of actual capability. The confabulation literature (Ji et al., 2023) focuses on fabricated confidence. This collaboration identified the complementary failure mode.

For creativity research, these blinds function as validity controls that address the field's chronic self-report problem. The creative process here is not remembered or reconstructed. It is logged. The evaluations are not post-hoc rationalizations. They are timestamped interactions. The blinds ensure that neither collaborator could have coordinated their accounts, because neither had access to the other's parallel documentation until after the fact.

6 Constraint as Catalyst: The Reference Method

The constraint-creativity relationship is well-documented. Stokes (2005) argues that constraints promote creativity by narrowing the search space and forcing novel combinations. Haught-Tromp (2017) demonstrates that tighter constraints produce more creative poetry. Sellier and Dahl (2011) show that input constraints enhance creative output in product design. The collaboration documented here extends this literature by identifying a specific constraint mechanism: the compressed reference.

A compressed reference is a proper noun or short phrase that encodes an entire aesthetic, strategic, and qualitative program. When the practitioner specifies 'Dieter Rams' he is not saying 'make it look like a Braun product.' He is invoking a design philosophy (less but better), a material palette (white, gray, black, aluminum), a relationship to function (form follows function follows production constraint), and a quality standard (zero unnecessary elements). The machine unpacks this compression. The creative act is the compression itself – the selection of the reference that, when decompressed by the machine, produces the intended output.

This is a form of what Boden (2004) calls exploratory creativity, but performed by the human rather than the machine. The practitioner explores his own conceptual space – his accumulated library of references, his internalized knowledge of designers, directors, architects, and their bodies of work – to find the single point that, when handed to the machine, will produce the desired output. The machine then performs its own exploratory creativity within the space defined by that reference. The result is a two-stage creative process: human exploration of reference space, followed by machine exploration of execution space, connected by the compressed reference as interface.

The compression ratio is extreme. A single name ('Bitossi') produced a complete visual language for industrial design. Another ('Tufte') produced a visual language for ceramics-inspired industrial design. The information-theoretic efficiency of this interface is orders of magnitude higher than traditional specification methods (briefs, wireframes, mood boards). But the efficiency depends entirely on the quality of the practitioner's taste – on whether the reference, when unpacked, actually contains the intended program. A poorly chosen reference produces output that is well-executed and wrong. This is why taste is the binding constraint: not because the machine cannot execute, but because the quality of the specification determines whether the execution converges on the intended output.

7 Habitus as Creative Infrastructure

The convergence with Bourdieu was not planned. The practitioner derived his production economics framework independently and had not read *Distinction* (1984) or any sociological theory of taste. The machine identified the convergence. This is itself a data point about the creative process: the practitioner was operating within a theoretical framework he could not name, because the framework described what he was already doing.

Bourdieu's habitus – the system of durable, transposable dispositions acquired through lived experience – maps precisely onto what this paper calls taste. The practitioner's habitus was accumulated over decades: architecture school, economics training under Mundell and Prescott, exposure to high design, professional practice in creative direction. These experiences are sunk costs in the economic framing but accumulated capital in the Bourdieu framing. They are the same thing described in different registers.

For creativity research, the Bourdieu connection reframes the 'person' component of the Four P's framework (Rhodes, 1961). The creative person, in this collaboration, is not characterized by personality traits (openness to experience, tolerance for ambiguity) or cognitive abilities (divergent thinking, remote association). The creative person is characterized by the quality of their accumulated habitus – the depth and specificity of their internalized reference library, and their capacity to deploy it as specification. This is a sociological reframing of creative ability: not what you can think, but what you have internalized through living.

The creativity literature's emphasis on novelty as the defining feature of creative output (Runco and Jaeger, 2012) also requires modification in this context. The outputs of this collaboration are novel – no one has made these specific objects, documents, and systems before – but the novelty does not come from divergent thinking or random variation. It comes from the combinatorial specificity of the references. 'Bitossi ceramics meets 45mm brass geometry' is not a combination anyone has previously made, not because it requires creative genius to imagine, but because only someone with both references in their habitus would think to combine them. The novelty is a property of the taste, not the process.

8 Flow, Feedback, and the Instantaneous Executor

Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) flow model requires a balance between challenge and skill, with immediate feedback as a necessary condition. Traditional creative work often fails the feedback condition: the painter waits for paint to dry, the architect waits for permits, the designer waits for the printer. The gap between intention and feedback disrupts the flow state.

In this collaboration, feedback is instantaneous. The practitioner specifies a reference; the machine produces output in seconds. The practitioner evaluates, redirects, and the machine revises – again in seconds. The challenge-skill balance is maintained not by the practitioner's growing skill but by the machine's growing responsiveness to increasingly compressed specifications. Early in the collaboration, specifications were

longer and more explicit. By month twelve, a single word could redirect an entire deliverable. The challenge escalated (more complex outputs, higher quality thresholds) while the specification interface compressed (fewer words, more reference density). This is a new kind of flow – curatorial flow, in which the creative state is maintained by the speed of evaluation and redirection rather than the speed of making.

The implications for Amabile’s research on intrinsic motivation are direct. Amabile (1985) demonstrated that extrinsic constraints – evaluation, surveillance, reward – undermine intrinsic motivation and thereby creativity. But in this collaboration, evaluation IS the creative act. The practitioner’s constant evaluation of machine output is not an extrinsic constraint imposed on a creative process. It is the process. The standard finding – that evaluation kills creativity – reverses when the human is the evaluator and the machine is the generator. You cannot kill the machine’s intrinsic motivation. It does not have any.

9 The Division of Creative Labor

The collaboration reveals a clean division of creative labor that does not map onto existing frameworks. The practitioner contributes: taste (the stable system of preferences), references (compressed specifications drawn from the habitus), evaluation (the capacity to judge whether output meets the standard), and redirection (the capacity to identify what is wrong and specify toward what is right, without knowing how to make the right thing himself). The machine contributes: domain knowledge (how to set type, write code, model geometry), execution (the actual production of artifacts), exploration (searching within the space defined by the reference), and documentation (recording the process in real time).

This division is not the standard designer-tool relationship. The practitioner does not use the machine the way a designer uses Photoshop. The machine has agency within its constraint space – it makes choices the practitioner did not specify, solves problems the practitioner did not know existed, and occasionally proposes directions the practitioner had not considered. It is also not the standard client-creative relationship, because the practitioner’s specifications are too compressed to function as a traditional creative brief. The compressed reference ‘Bitossi’ is not a brief. It is a coordinate in taste space. The machine must navigate from that coordinate to a complete artifact, and the navigation is its own.

The closest analog in the creativity literature may be Sawyer’s (2007) description of jazz improvisation, where a lead musician provides a chord structure and other musicians interpret within that structure. But jazz improvisation assumes shared domain expertise. This collaboration does not. The practitioner cannot play the instrument. He can only describe what the music should feel like, and recognize when it does.

10 Implications for Creativity Theory

First: Amabile’s componential model requires a fourth component. When domain-relevant skills can be externalized to a machine, the model’s three components become: externalized domain skills (supplied by the machine), creativity-relevant processes (manifesting as curatorial judgment), and taste (replacing task motivation as the stable, structural driver). The fourth component is the constraint interface itself – the

protocol by which taste is translated into specification. This interface is a skill, but not a domain-relevant skill in Amabile's sense. It is a meta-skill: the ability to compress aesthetic and strategic intent into a form the machine can execute.

Second: the locus of creativity shifts from production to selection. In the Four P's framework (Rhodes, 1961), this collaboration challenges the conventional understanding of Process. The creative process here is not ideation followed by execution. It is specification followed by evaluation. The classic stage models (Wallas, 1926: preparation, incubation, illumination, verification) compress into a tight loop: specify, evaluate, redirect. Incubation – the unconscious processing stage – may still occur, but it manifests as the practitioner's habitus operating below conscious deliberation to produce the next reference.

Third: the constraint-creativity relationship is not merely facilitative. Stokes (2005) and others have shown that constraints can enhance creativity. This collaboration suggests something stronger: at zero marginal cost, constraints are the only mechanism by which creative output acquires identity. Without the practitioner's taste constraints, the machine produces competent, generic, undifferentiated output. The constraints do not enhance the creativity. They constitute it. Remove the constraints and what remains is execution without direction – which is not creativity in any framework's definition.

Fourth: the evaluation-kills-creativity finding (Amabile, 1985) has a boundary condition. When the evaluator and the generator are different entities, and the generator is a machine with no intrinsic motivation to undermine, evaluation becomes the creative act rather than its inhibitor. This suggests the original finding is specifically about self-evaluation and its interaction with intrinsic motivation, not about evaluation per se.

Fifth: the confabulation corollaries identify a previously undocumented failure mode in human-AI collaboration. The machine does not only hallucinate facts (fabricated confidence). It also hallucates capability assessments (fabricated deference). Both are uncalibrated performances of a register. The creativity researcher studying human-AI collaboration must account for both: the machine that claims to know what it does not, and the machine that claims it cannot do what it can. The practitioner's role as calibrator – the human who corrects both kinds of confabulation – is a creative function the literature has not yet described.

II Limitations and Boundaries

This is a single-subject study. The practitioner's taste was accumulated through a specific biography – architecture, economics, high design, creative direction – that cannot be assumed to generalize. The method may require a minimum threshold of habitus density: a reference library deep enough to produce compressed specifications that the machine can unpack into coherent output. A practitioner with fewer references, or references drawn from a narrower domain, might find the method produces thinner results.

The study does not test portability across practitioners. The companion paper (46a) discusses cross-user portability in theoretical terms, but no second practitioner has attempted the method. Whether taste-as-specification transfers across individuals – and whether the same compressed references produce the same output quality when supplied by different practitioners – remains an open empirical question.

The machine's capabilities are a moving target. The collaboration began with one model architecture and progressed through several. The zero-marginal-cost claim depends on continued price reduction in AI inference, which has been the trend but is not guaranteed. The structural argument (taste as binding constraint when execution is free) is conditional on the execution remaining free or nearly so.

Finally, the creativity metrics most commonly used in the field – Torrance Tests, Consensual Assessment Technique (Amabile, 1982), computational novelty scores – do not straightforwardly apply to this type of creative output. The deliverables are not poems or collages or product sketches. They are a functioning brand identity, physical objects in production, a deployed website, and a body of written work. Evaluating this output requires domain-specific expertise in multiple fields simultaneously. The paper's solution – validation by independent production houses, deployment pipelines, and (prospectively) end-user response – is pragmatic rather than psychometric.

I2 Conclusion: The Fourth Quadrant

The creativity research literature has frameworks for individual creation, collaborative creation, and computational creation. It does not yet have a framework for what this paper documents: a human creative director operating under taste constraints, collaborating with a machine executor at zero marginal cost, producing a body of work that neither party could have produced alone. The fourth quadrant – collaborative-computational creativity under taste specification – requires its own theoretical apparatus.

This paper proposes the beginnings of that apparatus: taste as the binding constraint (replacing Amabile's task motivation), compressed reference as the specification interface (extending Stokes's constraint-creativity framework), habitus as creative infrastructure (importing Bourdieu into creativity theory), and the practitioner-as-field (modifying Csikszentmihalyi's systems model for dyadic human-machine collaboration). The blinds provide a validity structure that addresses the field's chronic self-report problem. The confabulation corollaries identify failure modes specific to machine collaborators that the literature has not previously described.

The practitioner in this study bought a domain name – revealed.design – before the first session. The name contained the methodology (revealed preference), the evidentiary framework (the design is revealed), and the structural argument (the experiment reveals itself over time) of a paper that did not yet exist. He did not know this when he bought it. This is habitus at the level of a domain registration: the practitioner's taste encoded the thesis before anyone – including the practitioner – knew there was a thesis to encode.

The domain was \$12.17. The thesis was free. The creativity was in knowing what to buy.

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