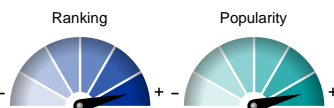


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Evolutionary music doesn't mean the death of the creator | Victor Keegan

Victor Keegan

Almost anyone can be an artist in the digital age – yet language and meaning remain as elusive as ever. We know that internet technology has disrupted the music industry, but could it disrupt music itself, or painting, or literature? Armand Leroi, professor of evolutionary development biology at Imperial College London, believes music is already in the frame.

He told Radio 4's Today programme today: "What we are trying to find out is whether you need a composer to make music ... and we don't think you do." The idea is that music can evolve from a computer programme randomly,

churning out two short loops of noise which are then allowed to "breed" and recombine, mixing up the material to create four new loops, and so on. Whether similar techniques could produce paintings or poems remains to be seen but art, especially non-representational art, is already facing an identity crisis.

For some time it has been difficult to tell the difference between paintings generated by apes and those by humans as comparison sites such as An Artist or an Ape confirm.

Now that computers are generating random shapes and patterns of colour it is becoming impossible to distinguish between human and machine-generated content. This doesn't matter if you merely want something pleasant to look at, but it does raise the perennial problem "What is art?" in a more challenging form.

Does it matter if art can't pass some kind of Turing test, in which human endeavour can be separated from chance? And who gets the credit – the creator of the software, the person who presses the button to produce myriad random patterns or the person who chooses one of those patterns as their art? With photo applications that apply filters to pictures prior to them being shared

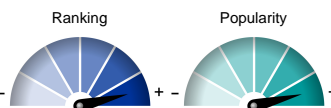
The screenshot shows the Guardian website interface. At the top, there are navigation links for 'Edition: US', 'Sign in', 'Mobile', and 'About us'. The main header features the Guardian logo and a search bar. Below the header, there are category links: 'News', 'US', 'World', 'Sports', 'Comment', 'Culture', 'Business', 'Environment', 'Science', 'Travel', 'Tech', 'Media', 'Life & style', 'Apps', and 'Data'. The article title 'Evolutionary music doesn't mean the death of the creator' is prominently displayed, along with the author's name 'Victor Keegan' and the publication date 'Tuesday 19 June 2012 13.30 EDT'. A small image of three men looking at a document is visible. On the right side, there are social media sharing options (Share, Tweet, Email) and a list of related topics: Technology, Media, Culture, Books, and Poetry. A sidebar on the right contains a 'Guardian Professional Networks' logo and a news snippet about 'West Midlands police to cut call centre hubs'.

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on a social network, it can be very difficult to know whether you are looking at a photo or a painting.

Maybe it doesn't matter.

The digital revolution enables almost anyone with an idea to become a creator of art and, who knows, in the future people may decide they would prefer to have their own randomised art at home rather than an established painter. Sculptors are already using computer-generated 3D photos to create their artwork and then getting someone else, maybe far away, to print them out on the new breed of three-dimensional printers.

If you think this is all pie in the sky – there is now an app for the iPhone, Sculpteo, enabling anyone to design their own sculptures from photographs on their mobile and have them printed out as fully formed objects on remote 3D printers.

Being computer generated, it will be easy to create randomly shaped sculptures, thereby blurring traditional demarcation lines in sculpture. Words have so far been immune to digital disruption despite there being only 26 letters of the alphabet to play around with.

This is because the output of language (words and sentences) is much more formalised than in other art forms and the maths of random generation is against you. More than 12 years ago I set up a website, www.shakespearesmonkey.co.uk, (it doesn't work well on all browsers) to randomly replicate two lines of poetry.

A coder colleague at the Guardian, Noll Scott, predicted it would soon reach 12 or 13 correct letters (out of 48) and then take many years to progress.

He was right.

The programme is still running 24/7, but it hasn't improved on 13 correct letters at one go for over eight years.

There have been lots of randomly produced poems but few are remembered.

As for a computer-written novel, that is strictly for the birds unless it just extracts material from existing texts – or if the Imperial College experiments in Darwinian music can be applied to sentences.

Meanwhile, in judging what is art, we would do well to remember JH Huxley's observation – paintings by apes are pleasing to look at, and the point is they don't pretend to symbolise anything.