

# THE WORKFLOW IS WHERE CREATIVITY HAPPENS

How artificial intelligence is changing the decision cycle, creative exploration and the economics of product development

When artificial intelligence is discussed in relation to creativity, the conversation still tends to focus on its most visible manifestation: the ability to produce an image in seconds, develop a variation, simulate a product, or create a representation that, until only a few years ago, might have required days of work.

This is certainly part of the phenomenon, but I do not believe it is the most important part. The deeper transformation concerns what happens between an intuition and the next decision: how long it takes to see the consequences of an idea, how many alternatives can genuinely be explored before material, labour and capital are committed, and how much understanding of the product can be developed before it reaches physical realisation.

From this perspective, artificial intelligence is not a machine that creates in place of the designer. Its usefulness depends on the quality of the system into which it is introduced and on the expertise of those who govern it. A model can generate possibilities; the real question is knowing which of those possibilities deserve to be developed.

When I think about the relationship between AI and creativity, therefore, I do not think first of the ability to produce more images. I think of the possibility of bringing an idea into focus more quickly and distilling it to its essence through the process itself. An initial intuition rarely contains all the precision of the eventual result. It is the work that progressively brings it to its centre: one decision provokes another, something I see forces me to reconsider what I had imagined,

and an unexpected result opens a path that did not exist at the outset. Part of the significance of AI lies in its ability to multiply these passages without requiring us to wait each time for the entire physical process to make them visible.

## The workflow does not come after creativity

Anyone who has spent a long time in product development knows an apparently simple but fundamental principle: a product is not born fully formed in the designer's mind and then merely executed. A substantial part of creativity happens while the work is being done.

An intuition generates a form; once seen, that form suggests a different proportion; proportion alters length, and length changes the relationship with a trouser or a shoe. A material changes the perception of volume, a wash produces an unexpected surface, and a detail initially introduced to solve a technical problem can acquire an aesthetic force of its own. A colour finally seen across an entire garment can alter the balance of the palette and, in turn, suggest another material, another product or a different direction.

In my experience, moreover, the distinction between what is creative and what is technical is nowhere near as clear-cut as it is often presented. A limitation of weight or gauge may force a reconsideration of volume and open up a better solution; hardware, a seam, a finish or the unexpected behaviour of a fabric can become part of the design language. Proportion, colour, drop, shoulder, fabric, weight, construction and detail do not progress along separate tracks: they interact continuously, and decisions emerge from that interaction that could not have been fully formulated at the beginning.

At the level of the individual product, therefore, the process does more than refine the original intuition. Interaction with what progressively emerges can alter its centre, making decisive a solution, a relationship or a product direction that was initially marginal or not yet visible. The unexpected behaviour of a material, a piece of hardware, a process, a defect, a proportion, or simply the result of an iteration can open up a new possibility: substantially improve the original product, generate a variation, suggest an additional product, or lead to the abandonment of the initial hypothesis.

This does not mean that iteration repeatedly reinvents the identity of the collection. The theme, the objective, the aesthetic register and the overall idea precede development and define its field. The process works within that field: it can reveal possibilities that were not initially foreseen and, above all, help bring the collection that has already been conceived into sharper focus.

The project, then, is not the progressive execution of an already completed idea. The idea itself is transformed by the consequences of the decisions made during its development. This is why the workflow does not come after creativity: it is one of the places in which creativity happens.

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## Creativity as a feedback cycle

The traditional fashion process unfolds through a long sequence: research, moodboards, sketches, technical drawings, material research, colour cards, yarn trials, dyeing, washing and finishing; followed by pattern cutting, a first prototype, fitting, corrections, a second prototype, further variations and finally the definitive sample.

Each of these stages does more than perform an operational function; it also produces information. A garment that appears convincing on paper may lose strength once it acquires volume, while a shoulder that appears correct in a drawing may feel overly constructed once worn. Product development grows through precisely these moments of verification: a hypothesis is formulated, made visible or physical, observed, judged, and the next decision emerges from that judgement.

The historical constraint of this model has been the time required to complete each feedback cycle. Days or weeks might pass between a decision and the moment at which its consequences could genuinely be seen, because a change required a new drawing, communication with a pattern cutter or supplier, perhaps a new material, another process and eventually another sample.

Artificial intelligence intervenes in this interval. It does not replace observation, comparison or judgement; it increases the frequency with which they can occur.

For that reason, it is reductive simply to say that AI makes creativity faster. More accurately, it shortens the distance between one creative decision and the possibility of making the next. Within the same period in which a traditional process might allow only a handful of hypotheses to be tested, many more alternatives can now be observed. This does not necessarily mean thinking less. It can mean increasing the number of times an idea encounters the consequences of its own decisions while it is still malleable. Through those encounters, the idea is refined, corrected and, at times, discovers a direction that was not visible at the outset.

### 03 / RECURSIVE PROCESS

## From a sequential process to a recursive one

If AI were merely an accelerator of the traditional sequence, the change would be significant but not structural. We would continue to imagine development in the same way: first the idea, then the drawing, the material, the prototype and the correction.

What changes is also the shape of the process. A decision about silhouette can be tested almost immediately against a different material; that material may suggest a new palette; the palette can be observed across the complete look; the look can be considered in relation to the collection, and that assessment can lead back to the construction of the individual product. The process no longer has to move only forwards: it can move backwards and laterally.

This is not simply a matter of seeing more products at the same time. It is about seeing earlier the overall structure that the collection is beginning to build. It is not enough for thirty products to be individually correct: they must construct the same person, the same universe, the same level of tension, and produce a legible narrative when seen together. Moving rapidly from the detail of a shoulder or a colour to the overall scheme makes it possible to understand much earlier whether a local decision is strengthening that world or weakening it.

The technological trajectory that makes this possible began long before generative AI. From CAD to product lifecycle management systems and 3D, each generation of tools has brought part of the verification process forward and reduced the distance between intention and execution. The difference with

generative AI lies in where it enters the workflow: closer to intention, because it allows a transformation to be formulated before it has been fully translated into technical operations.

The question, therefore, is not whether CAD, 3D or PLM will disappear, but whether they will continue to have the same centrality at every stage. CAD remains indispensable when construction must become exact, 3D when controlled simulation is required, and PLM when data and responsibility must be governed. What may become less necessary is the use of specialist tools, expensive in terms of time, for every exploratory hypothesis. AI can occupy an earlier and more semantic layer, where the question is which ideas are genuinely worth carrying into those tools.

#### 04 / OUTCOME

## Seeing the outcome before it exists

One of the most interesting consequences concerns the relationship between the project and its final representation. Historically, the image closest to the outcome arrived at the end: idea, sketch, technical drawing, prototype, sample, look, shoot, campaign.

Today, it is possible to obtain much earlier a representation sufficiently developed that it functions not merely as a sketch, but as a development tool. It becomes possible to observe not simply a coat, but the person that coat constructs; not merely a pair of trousers, but their relationship with the shoe, the top, posture and styling; not merely a colour, but the way that colour travels across different categories.

An image that would once have arrived close to the end of the process, perhaps at shooting or campaign stage, can now enter much earlier and feed back into the product. Looking at that outcome, I may understand that the coat needs to be longer, that the volume lacks sufficient definition, that a material appears too soft, that a colour needs to be reduced in intensity, or that the shoe completely changes the reading of the silhouette. Visual communication therefore ceases to be only what describes the product once it has been decided; at certain stages, it can become part of the way the product itself is decided.

The outcome is no longer only the final point of the process. It can become a new input, allowing the project to be developed partly through the anticipated consequences of the project itself.

A highly resolved representation, however, also possesses persuasive force and may orient judgement towards what the model happens to render particularly well. Experience does not make anyone immune to this effect, but it provides more criteria outside the image against which to test it. Knowledge of material, proportion, construction, visual culture, identity and product memory help distinguish what genuinely expands the project from what merely steers it because it is visually persuasive. The earlier arrival of the image therefore increases not only the available possibilities, but also the responsibility of the eye.

## Making part of cognition visible

The designer has always worked with an enormous quantity of partial information: a swatch, a yarn card, a colour card, a wash test, a two-dimensional drawing, a pattern. At the same time, all these elements had to be imagined as they might eventually function together as product, body, look and collection. A substantial part of the work therefore consisted in holding mentally relationships that did not yet exist in visible form.

The benefit of AI is not simply that it saves the time required to produce a representation. It is that less attention has to be spent constructing mentally the minimum conditions required to judge a hypothesis. If I can see sooner, I can devote a larger share of my thought to understanding what I see, comparing it, relating it to everything else and deciding.

In this sense, AI does not replace thought: it can change where thought is spent.

## The swatch is not the product

Colour and material make this distinction particularly clear. In fashion, significant creative and economic decisions are often made while looking at extremely small surfaces. A shade can be extraordinary on a small yarn card and lose all its strength when it occupies the surface of a full garment. A beige may become impoverished, a grey too cold, or a brown may shift very slightly towards red, and that apparently minor deviation can be enough to turn a seductive idea into an ordinary product. A yarn that appears rich on the card may, after knitting, washing and finishing, fail to deliver the depth or texture that had been imagined.

These are not secondary differences. They often constitute the distance between a product that is merely correct and one capable of generating desire. Anticipated visualisation does not replace physical verification, but it allows part of the problem to be confronted earlier and makes it possible to observe colour, material and proportion not in isolation, but within the product, the look and the collection as a whole.

In real practice, however, the designer does not begin from an abstract universe to be invented by the model. The starting point is what is known and what exists: materials that have been handled and used, weights, handles, processes, constructions, yarn and fabric cards, and a memory of products already developed. Even when imagining a bonded construction, a reversible piece, a jacquard, an intarsia or a new embroidery, the quality of the hypothesis derives from knowing what is materially possible and how those choices behave on a product. AI can help make visible more quickly what that knowledge, governed by experience, might become.

## The cost of seeing whether an idea works

The traditional system did not merely limit the number of alternatives that could be explored; it also conditioned the degree of creative risk that was economically reasonable to assume. Testing an audacious combination might mean ordering a material, requesting a dye trial, producing a yarn test, making a sample and involving pattern cutters, technicians and suppliers. Every experiment carried a real cost, and this created caution not because ideas were lacking, but because not every idea could afford to be tested.

The issue, therefore, is not only the cost of error. There is an earlier cost: the cost required simply to see whether an idea works. In a traditional physical system, money often had to be spent before sufficient information existed to make a decision; at least part of the hypothesis had to be materialised before it could be judged.

It is this cost of “seeing whether” that artificial intelligence can substantially reduce at certain stages.

When that marginal cost falls, the willingness to experiment also changes. A combination that would previously have been discarded before it could properly be seen can now be examined; it may prove wrong, but it may also produce a second intuition, which produces a third, opening a direction that the traditional process might never have encountered.

Under certain conditions, efficiency does not constrain creativity. It can make it freer.

## Moving part of the uncertainty upstream

A significant proportion of the cost of developing a collection is, in reality, the cost of uncertainty. More fabrics are ordered because it is not yet clear which will work; more colours are requested because it is not yet known which will retain its strength on the product; dyeing, washing and finishing trials multiply, along with patterns and prototypes.

Every sample absorbs far more than the material of which it is made: the work of the pattern cutter and sample maker, the time of the design and product-development teams, technicians, suppliers, dye houses, laundries and finishers, shipping, fitting, corrections, revisions and the management time required to coordinate the whole process.

The objective is not to eliminate this physical dimension, because material still has to be handled, fit has to be verified, and shrinkage, pilling, stability, memory, sewability and manufacturability cannot be certified by an image. The change lies in resolving a greater proportion of uncertainty before reaching that point.

If a colour variation already reveals a clear weakness, it need not be sampled; if a silhouette does not hold within the overall architecture, it can be changed before becoming a physical cost. The prototype does not disappear: its function can progressively change, becoming less a site of completely open exploration and more the physical verification of a hypothesis that has already been developed in depth.

The result is an apparent paradox: more alternatives can be explored while fewer unnecessary physical attempts need to be produced.

09 / POTENTIAL

## Showing what a material can become

The same logic can change the relationship with producers of yarns, fabrics, leathers and technical materials. A producer traditionally presents a material through a swatch, a card or a hanger and leaves the client to make the mental leap between that fragment and everything it might eventually become.

With more advanced visualisation, the same material can be interrogated rapidly across different categories, silhouettes and combinations. A yarn is no longer presented only as yarn: it can be seen as knitwear, outerwear, accessory, surface and colour within different product worlds.

This can reduce the amount of material required for preliminary exploration while simultaneously increasing the number of commercially perceptible applications. AI does not replace the material; it can help reveal its potential.

10 / JUDGEMENT

## When judgement becomes usable knowledge

As the production of alternatives becomes easier, the relative value of being able to produce many of them decreases, while the value of understanding them increases.

Two people may look at the same representation and see entirely different information. One sees an interesting garment; the other sees a material that is too light for the construction, an incorrect balance between shoulder and volume, a length that weakens the silhouette, insufficient texture, a detail that will be difficult to industrialise, or a small solution capable of becoming an identifying code for the entire collection.

That difference derives largely from accumulated experience of looking at the product not merely as an image, but through design, fitting, development, yarns, materials, suppliers, processes, finishing and production. After years of work, one no longer looks at a representation simply to decide whether one “likes” it; one also sees what that image implies. Greater generative capacity does not make experience less important. It makes the ability to read what has been generated more valuable.

The first knowledge system, before any digital archive, is accumulated experience. AI can amplify it and make its consequences visible more rapidly, but it cannot retrospectively create the domain knowledge required to decide whether what is being observed genuinely makes sense. The less knowledge available with which to interrogate an output, the greater the risk of confusing the plausibility of the representation with the quality of the design decision.

When execution becomes abundant, judgement therefore becomes the scarce resource. Yet if that judgement is also to become an organisational asset, it cannot remain only in the minds of the most experienced people. Previous decisions, the reasons behind a choice, rejected materials, problems encountered, constructions, suppliers, mistakes, corrections and outcomes must be able to feed a memory to which the organisation can return.

By a knowledge system, therefore, I do not mean a generic collection of references. I mean the concrete memory of the work: drawings and technical drawings, materials and constructions, trials, versions, decisions taken and rejected, production processes, constraints encountered, fittings, corrections and outcomes.

Such a memory does not arise automatically because a company possesses an archive. Many organisations have thousands of files, images, technical sheets and datasets separated by function without possessing anything that could genuinely be called decision memory. For knowledge to become usable, it must be selected, connected, updated and governed; crucially, it must preserve not only what was done, but why it was done, what was rejected and with what outcome.

In this context, the prompt is an interface, not a strategy. The value lies in knowing which question to ask, how to interpret the answer, what to reject and which alternative to pursue. AI becomes particularly interesting when it helps prepare the decision better: by making hypotheses comparable, surfacing inconsistencies

and consequences that would previously have appeared later, and reducing the blind spots with which people arrive at the moment of choice. Responsibility for the decision remains human.

As generative models become progressively available to everyone, the advantage therefore shifts towards the system that governs them: a model produces possibilities; a knowledge system turns those possibilities into direction.

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Abundance, however, introduces a new responsibility. When every hypothesis can be followed almost immediately by another, the limit is no longer necessarily the capacity to explore, but the ability to recognise when exploration has exhausted its value.

It is always possible to alter another proportion, test another colour, change material or generate one more variation, but that does not mean the project continues to improve. Part of judgement lies in recognising the point at which the idea has achieved sufficient precision and coherence, and further intervention would begin to disperse rather than strengthen it.

In a system in which alternatives become abundant, knowing when to stop becomes part of the creative process.

## Beyond the design studio

When the creative decision cycle contracts, the effect can extend beyond the design studio. Fashion organisations operate through constant transfers of information between design, merchandising, development, sourcing, production, retail and management; reducing the latency between these functions can allow a piece of evidence to be related more rapidly to the product, the collection, materials, costs and industrial timings.

This does not mean allowing the market to design the collection. It means allowing the consequences of decisions to return more quickly into the decision-making process.

The more interesting consequence is not necessarily the production of more collections, but reducing the amount of future that a company is required to predict at any one moment. If decision and development cycles become shorter — and if sourcing, development and supply chain possess sufficient capacity to respond — some decisions can be distributed more progressively, leaving more room for observation and correction without increasing capital, stock and risk in the same proportion.

## Where representation stops

A sophisticated representation can be highly convincing without being true. It may suggest a drape that the real material will not possess, produce a surface that appears extraordinary but cannot be manufactured, or make a construction seductive that will fail once placed on the body. Visual plausibility is not the same thing as product validity.

It is therefore useful to distinguish between different levels of truth. A generative system may show that a hypothesis is visually plausible; technical tools such as CAD and 3D can verify part of its geometric and constructive coherence; only material, prototyping, fitting and industrialisation can ultimately establish whether that solution is genuinely buildable, repeatable and desirable in the physical world.

Each level answers a different question; the problem begins when a tool is asked to certify what it cannot know.

There is also the risk of homogenisation. If millions of people use the same models and similar references, an abundance of images does not guarantee a greater diversity of thought. Distinctiveness must therefore also come from what a general-purpose model does not possess: a specific memory, a history of decisions, codes developed over time, knowledge of materials and constructions, archives and a criterion belonging to that individual or organisation.

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APPLICATION / F/W 27

## F/W 27: progressively constructing a world

F/W 27 did not begin as a collection “designed by AI”, nor as an exercise in which a model was asked to invent products from nothing. The starting point was an existing vocabulary: an aesthetic vision, a culture of product and material developed over time, volumes and architectures I know, and processes and techniques that belong to my experience.

In developing the collection, I used generative capability to create visual iterations progressively closer to the overall outcome and to the final imaginaries of the collection. The value was not in obtaining a single resolved image, but in being able to see very early how initially isolated elements might belong to the same world.

As that world became visible, it began to feed back into the decisions: volume, weight, drop, degree of softness, the reading of fabrics, the relationship between categories and the overall orientation of the collection.

The representation served to evolve visually the product knowledge already present in the project, to test how things should be positioned, how they should relate to one another and how a series of elements might become a coherent architecture. Seeing the product within its own world and, at the same time, that world as a whole made it possible to reconsider more quickly what might have appeared resolved in an isolated drawing.

Expanding the space of exploration does not mean that every project must begin in unknown territory. In F/W 27, generative capability was used primarily to interrogate more deeply an already established product and material vocabulary, revealing combinations and relationships that a more fragmented form of representation would have made slower to perceive.

In other processes, the same reduction in the cost of “seeing whether” may support more speculative forms of exploration. Here, the principal value was different: to make an existing body of knowledge recursive and visible, so that it could be pushed further, selected more rigorously and brought into sharper focus.

F/W 27 is therefore not evidence of a machine replacing authorship. It is an application in which generative capability expands the territory over which experience and vision can operate and increases the frequency with which the consequences of decisions can be observed.

## A new architecture of creative decision-making

To describe this transformation simply as “AI-generated design” is to remain at the most superficial level of the phenomenon.

The more significant change occurs in the relationship between intuition and consequence. The workflow can become more recursive; the outcome can feed back into the product; part of visual cognition can become observable; the cost of determining whether a hypothesis deserves to be developed can fall; and a larger proportion of uncertainty can be resolved before material, labour and capital are committed.

The result is not necessarily a simpler process. It is potentially a more intensive one, because the same period of time can contain more observation, more comparison and more judgement.

I return, therefore, to the initial intuition. Artificial intelligence is interesting not because it replaces the process through which an idea takes form, but because it can make that process denser. It allows the idea to encounter the consequences of its own decisions more often and more rapidly and, through those encounters, to be corrected, pushed further, stripped back, made more coherent and ultimately brought into focus.

In this sense, technology does not necessarily reduce creative work: it can help us distil more precisely what we are trying to build.

The more commonplace the ability to generate becomes, the more value will concentrate around what remains difficult to replicate: experience, product culture, memory, technical competence, material knowledge and quality of judgement.

The decisive question, therefore, is not how much a machine can create, but how much more deeply, rapidly and consciously a person can create when the time and cost required to observe the consequences of their ideas are radically reduced.

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