

ABOUT THE CREATION OF SCRAP METAL: THE LOST SOUND OF THE 90s

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1. GENERAL IDEA

I would like to preface this document about the process of creating a tradition using Ai tools by saying that I am not someone with a strong expressive drive.¹ I don't particularly enjoy creating artistic artefacts when the process of creation involves some acts of reflection, whether it is writing, painting, or making music. This is something that is in general very painful for me (almost physically), and compared to artists I have talked to, I rarely feel an emotional satisfaction when a piece is finally completed. This is why I am usually more interested in improvisation. So, this work was mostly motivated out of curiosity for this fairly unique opportunity to try something different and trying to find the humour in it, which I take very seriously.

This peculiar topic of this year's Ai Music Generation Challenge made me want to explore the creation of music tradition beyond the music itself. I believe that the creation of a "tradition" exists primordially outside of the music. So most of my focus was directed on the *fakelore*. My starting point was a reflection about the word "tradition". I purposefully avoided the perhaps more obvious route of going towards "traditional music", which was explored in previous iteration of this challenge. Instead, I wanted to describe the emergence of a new tradition, with its codes and rituals. I wanted to combine a "real-world" practice with an online community; something rooted in our current post-modern and post-internet world. Therefore, everything in this work takes the approach of how things are talked about online, with different angles: chats, social networks, streams, blogs, web-pages, etc. This project takes direct inspiration from "The Most Mysterious Song on the Internet" and the devoted community around it, and their still going investigation to find the origins of an unidentified post-punk song from the 80s recorded on German radio by one person. After a couple of months of thinking about it, I started to have a clear idea of what I wanted this work to look/sound like. So I decided to go with writing the script for a non-existing YouTube investigation/video-essay, in which various evidence for the music tradition would appear, and the music that would have been played in post.

¹ Every words written in this document are my own. They have not been Ai generated.



Hello Internet, please welcome *Scrap Metal: The Lost Sound of the 90s*.

2. THE PROCESS

The idea of Scrap Metal took a while to emerge, as I wanted to make sure with myself, that I was not going to be completely off-topic with the purpose of this challenge. The general ideas about the form of the content of this project, and its aesthetics were also decided at this time. At this point, no Ai system has been used to brainstorm ideas, as I wanted to be perfectly clear on how I wanted Ai to be used before starting to do anything concrete.

Scrap Metal is described as a 90s *plunderphonics*² and metal inspired musical style, observed through the compensatory memory lenses of internet dwellers of the last decade. To reflect that in the process and the medium, I wanted to include some "meta" elements in how I approached things. Everything is made of scrap: No cost. No code. Writing the FauxTube script and producing the musical evidence was done in a parallel in about a month (which was not fully dedicated to it).

2.1 Creating the script

In term of human-Ai co-creativity, writing the FauxTube video script was the most straightforward part of the project. I used a *generate, select, and refine* approach, by prompting an array of Large Language Models (LLM), freely made available by LMSYS and UC Berkeley³, whilst also adding my own touch here and there. Overall, the large majority of the words (I'd say about 75%) are Ai generated. However the way the text is arranged is mostly of my own doing.

One of the convenient aspect of the lmsys website which I took advantage of a lot, is the "arena mode"⁴, allowing to use two LLMs at the same time, with the same prompts, therefore I could compare several results (sometimes very different in content), and chose one or the other, or mix the results; whatever worked best given the context. However, compared to other available tool like ChatGPT, these do not have access to an history of previous conversation, which mean that everytime I came back to the website, I had to add some fairly long elements to the prompt,

² Oswald (1985). Plunderphonics, or Audio Piracy as a Compositional Prerogative. *Wired Society Electro-Acoustic Conference*

³ <https://chat.lmsys.org/>

⁴ Zheng et al. (2023). Judging LLM-as-a-Judge with MT-Bench and Chatbot Arena. *NeurIPS*

like for instance previous generated paragraphs, in order to keep a stylistic continuity.

The main LLM Ai contributors for the script were: gpt-4-turbo, claude-2.0, and vicuna-33b. However, it felt overall mostly random which LLM gave the best usable generation given a particular prompt, which lead to very large amount of trial and error.

In the Mixed Initiative Co-Creative design space⁵, I would analyse this co-creative practice as:

- *human-initiated*: I was the one initiating communication with the LLM through prompts,
- mostly *elaborative*: The main purpose of the communication was to generate a continuation for the text, although some of the prompts were reflective in parts, regarding previous generation.
- with a *local scope*: The communication was focusing on direct continuation of the script. The higher level structure was only decided by me.

2.2 Creating the music

Making the musical artefacts for this work, was done in three parts: gathering the ‘scrap’, preparing the ‘yard’, and creating the ‘improvisation’.

In order to **gather the scrap**, I wanted to explore the possibility of using the output of Ai Music Recommendation system from online platforms (e.g. Spotify, Youtube, Bandcamp) as a source of inspiration by twisting their usual use. To do so, I created several fake avatar, using accounts on different virtual machines with fake IP addresses, corresponding to different Scrap Metal musicians. For each avatar, I then started to listen to songs on those platforms, following the musical taste I wanted them to have. For instance, Scrapyrd’s guest guitarist Lee Clarke, from the UK, used Spotify to listen to 70s folk rock and 90s video game music (among other things); and Scrapyrd’s guest organist Araki Sakai, from Japan, used Bandcamp to listen to avant-garde jazz and old-school doom metal. The songs that were then recommended by the online platforms were then the material to draw from, as inspiration for the tunes these musicians appear on.

Once the scrap was collected, I took upon the role of **preparing the yard**. This part of the composition process was not co-creative, as I wanted part of this work to be to explore by myself some areas of music production. I had a lot of fun making drums part. I hope it shows.

Finally, the ‘**improvisation**’ have been created by using a mix of things that I have played and things from the scrap. These things have been used to train and use two improvisation / music generation softwares: DYCI2⁶ and DadaGP⁷. The goal was to bring together as many different bits of various origins and methods, taking full advantage of using a lot of Take Lanes in Ableton Live, so that af-

ter everything has been combined, even me can not say for what is from where. The ‘improvisation’ have then been retouched manually to improve consistency, idiomaticity, and to add more expressiveness to the playing.

Everything is arranged in Ableton Live, and played through various VSTs, with each avatar / musician being associated to a specific rig and set up, and each band being associated with a different mix and mastering set up as well.

In the Mixed-Initiative Co-Creative design space, I would analyse gathering the scrap as *human-initiated* because of the avatar creation to use the online platform, *elaborative* and with a *global scope* as it was to gather general inspiration. And I would analyse the creation of the ‘improvisation’, as *human-initiated*, *elaborative* and with a *local scope*.

3. WAS AI USEFUL/NECESSARY?

I can now reflect on how pivotal the use of Ai was in this work, and ask myself several questions regarding why one could want to use Ai in artistic production.

Did Ai make things faster? The fair answer would be to say that it did, but very minimally. The part that takes the most time is thinking about the story prior to and in between the concrete realisation, and in that aspect Ai was entirely absent.

Did Ai make things easier? When it comes to writing, putting the words one after the other, it made things much more convenient for me, as I could just copy and paste and then adapt whole paragraphs. I am not necessarily great at writing fiction, and it is clear to me that coming up with the writing style and choosing the right words to convey the story would have been a lot more difficult without Ai. When it comes to creating the music however, the use of Ai probably made things a lot more complicated than it should be. But, that is not the fault of the Ai system. It is entirely due to how ridiculous the process I imposed to myself was. I probably could have made something of equivalent quality in less time and in a way less convoluted manner. However, there would have been much less fun in that, and therefore I probably wouldn’t have done it at all.

Did Ai make things different? For the writing, the use of Ai didn’t change the main direction of the story. However, a fair amount of small details and fun ideas emerged from the text generation that I decided to keep and to explore further. For the music, Ai was mainly used as a constraint generator for the choice of Scrap. It was interesting to explore this “misuse” of music recommendation systems. This reflected both in the creation of the Yard and of the “improvisation”. As such, the Ai system was not that much of a partner but more of a fun toy to play with. But at the end of the day, exploring the possibilities of co-creativity was the point is the process was the real interesting aspect for me.

⁵ Lin et al. (2023). Beyond Prompts: Exploring the Design Space of Mixed-Initiative Co-Creativity Systems. *International Conference on Computational Creativity*

⁶ <https://forum.ircam.fr/projects/detail/dicy2/>

⁷ <https://github.com/otnemrasordep/dadaGP>

4. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

You might have noticed, but the whole concept behind Scrap Metal contains a not-so-subtle meta reflection regarding copyrights issues and more generally around debates about intellectual property when it comes to generative Ai. I wanted the story to engage discussions that goes beyond the use of Ai, by connecting it directly to the world of *plunderphonics*. Although it is not strictly *plunderphonics* as it doesn't use audio sampling, I took purposefully and assume a piracy approach throughout the whole creative process. As it was written in the liner notes of John Oswald's *Plexure*: "No rights to the appropriate copyright owners, as everything here has been genuinely stolen." This political position being assumed, it is however fundamental for me to practice ethical piracy and therefore I took what I think are necessary precautions:

- First of all, the whole project is released under anti-copyright. No ©. No CC*.⁸ Being consistent is the least I can do.
- Second, I am only dealing with musical styles, and talking about communities that I am deeply familiar with, or even part of, and that are not "endangered". For the music side, I have been playing Jazz, Rock, Metal and Avant-garde, for the past 15 years (at least), and I have engaged quite thoroughly in their respective communities. Likewise, I often describe myself as a "child of the Internet", and I have been part of the communities mimicked here and there in the FauxTube script. Therefore, I can be sure with the utmost certainty that these traditions would not be harmed in any way by my humble babbling. On the contrary, I hope these communities will realise that this work is a genuine letter of admiration and appreciation.
- And finally, I decided to go with a "quality over quantity" approach. Internet is currently being flooded with low effort Ai generated content. The world doesn't need me to add more mud to the flood. Making the best I can do, at the cost of turbo-production (which I don't think should be valued anyway), is in my opinion the most 'ecological' way to preserve the digital world, and be what generative Ai and the Computational Creativity community should strive for.

I would like to conclude by saying that this is not over for Scrap Metal, and I will keep working now and then on this project. As the drummer and head of Neo Scrap Metal band K I L L J E S T E R, I can say that we will carry on working with our permanent guests, and hopefully invite other guests (and their scraps) to make more music together, and release an EP in 2024.

5. IN THE YARD

Aaron Parks, Adam Neely, Alexandre Astier, Andrew Hussie, Atarashii Gakko, Barbara Stiegler, Bernard Friot, Bernard Stiegler, Brad Mehldau, Dan Aykroyd, Devin Townsend, Douglas Wreden, Dylan Moran, Elena Pinderhughes, Erik Satie, Frank Zappa, Georges E. Lewis, g h o s t i n g, Gooseworx, Gotlib, Grant Kirkhope, Ian Underwood, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Jacques Vanier, Jeremy Elbertson, Joanne Richardson, Joel Johansson, John Oswald, John Zorn, Jonathan Coulton, Justin Whang, Kitboga, Lena Raine, Malaclypse the Younger, Mark Z. Danielewsky, Morgan Ågren, Nathan Fielder, Ono Ryoko, Pierre Schaeffer, Risa Takeda, Rosie Frater-Taylor, Ruth Underwood, Sara Flin, Sinead O'Connor, Tatsuya Yoshida, Terry Pratchett, Valkblue, Veddge, Vektroid, Yazz Ahmed.

⁸ Nimus (2006). Copyright, Copyleft and the Creative Anti-Commons.