



The new role of humans in design in the age of generative AI

I had a chance to discuss this profound question yesterday while giving a talk at an Aalto University course on Design Strategy and Innovation.

With the benefit of 24 hours to ponder the question, here's my more nuanced answer.

As generative AI fulfils an increasing number of our individual tasks, we humans must strive for three things in our work: higher abstraction, deeper quality, and broader scope.

Let's unpack that.

The role of humans in design & innovation

What will be the role of humans as gen AI handles an increasing amount of tasks in design and innovation?

- 1. Higher in abstraction**
We should work on higher levels of abstraction as AI handles an increasing amount of rote tasks.
- 2. Deeper in quality**
We will need to specialize in deeper niches and go beyond the baseline quality AI generates.
- 3. Wider in scope**
Generative AI will give us the opportunity to work on a larger scope going beyond our core capabilities.

The complex block contains a title, a question, three icons, and three numbered points. The icons are: 1. A blue background with a 3D staircase and an upward arrow. 2. An orange background with a 3D cube and a blue gemstone on top. 3. A green background with a 3D starburst made of wooden sticks.

1. Go higher - moving up in abstraction

As we're equipped with AI assistants that can handle more and more of our tasks, we'll have more bandwidth to work on higher abstraction levels.

This development is in line with the broad arch of human history. In 1910, 31% of the American workforce worked on farms in manual agricultural work. By 2012, that figure had fallen to less than 2%.

Mechanisation of physical labor has freed a larger part of humanity to focus on knowledge-intensive, more abstract work.

The same has happened in office work as rote administrative work has declined with the proliferation of personal computers and the Internet. Gone are the days of mid-level managers with personal secretaries juggling their calendars.

This broad trend of moving from physical and rote work to more abstract knowledge work will be supercharged by AI. It will give all of us an opportunity and pressure to go higher - to orchestrate the strategic big picture with AI assistants doing our bidding.

To manage this transition, it will be vital for us to:

- improve our thinking to add value on a higher strategic level.
- build training and coaching programs to enable a responsible transition for people.
- re-think the boundaries of our professional identities - ie. transitioning from designing user interface components to improving the holistic customer experience.

2. Go deeper - digging beyond the obvious

Generative AI is well known for often producing good but not spectacular results - a solid B or 8/10.

As it pulls answers - images, videos, and text - from patterns it's learned online, it can generate novel responses, but often it stays true to the readily available conventional wisdom and best practices.

Generative AI also has a democratisation effect. Non-designers can create good enough designs with tools like Canva and later Figma AI. The same is true for most expertise-based roles.

To add value, we must dig deeper. We need to develop deep expertise in small niches where we can excel at levels beyond generative AI.

The B grade level of proficiency from generative AI is becoming the new baseline of performance. The onus is on us to go deeper than that in our expertise and capability.

3. Go broader - reach beyond your core

At the same time, there will be a dynamic that runs counter to going deeper. It will be the importance and opportunity to go broader. Generative AI helps us achieve an adequate level of performance in areas we have less proficiency.

Let's say you're a service designer. With the help of generative AI, you can:

- write adequate copytext for customer journeys with the right prompting
- hone your business strategy understanding through conversations with Gen AI
- create mockup visualisations of service touch-points with image-generation tools like Midjourney

Generative AI is a leveller of performance.

[Recent research](#) has shown that Gen AI gives the biggest boost to those who perform the lowest. This can mean that we'll benefit from it the most in areas that are furthest away from our core expertise.

Reinventing our roles and identities

AI is not even near its full potential; it's just in its infancy.

.... if you want to stay in the game, you will have to basically **reinvent yourself** — and not just once, but repeatedly.

Yuval Noah Harari
Historian & Author



There is no set or definite answer to “[What will be the role of humans in design?](#)”. It’s a question to which we will need to uncover new answers constantly. As Yuval Noah Harari says, **we’ll need to re-invent our roles and the value we bring again and again.**

We’ll need to explore higher levels of strategic abstraction, delve deeper into specialised niches, and go broader beyond our core capabilities.

[What do you think? What will be our role?](#) Reply to this email, I’ll feature (with permission) the most insightful answers in future issues.

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