

An AI-generated version of the late actor Val Kilmer was used in the movie "As Deep as the Grave" after the actor was cast for the film but was too ill to work.

The AI revolution

From writing to acting to making music, a look at how the technology is changing entertainment and who's pushing back

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Is Hollywood about to meet the real-life Skynet?

Anyone who's been following the lightning-fast developments in artificial intelligence may be wondering whether the robot army that threatened humanity in 1984's "The Terminator" will soon crush the entertainment industry. One minute AI meant text-based platforms like ChatGPT, the next it meant easy-to-use websites that can generate highly realistic videos of your favorite actors, your friends

or yourself. Earlier this year, after an Irish filmmaker used a Chinese AI model to create a stunningly convincing video of Tom Cruise and Brad Pitt fighting on a crumbling freeway overpass, one filmmaker told The New York Times: "I just think it's nothing short of terrifying."

Already it seems clear the technology is here to stay. In movies and television, it's being employed behind the scenes and in front of the camera, often imperceptibly. In music, it's getting good enough to reach the charts and draw millions of followers. It's even helping producers decide

which screenplays to greenlight — which means it has a say in which movies we will or won't get to see.

Here's a guide to how AI is transforming entertainment, what it means for creators and how it might affect consumers.

WHAT IS GENERATIVE AI?

Loosely defined, it's any artificial intelligence used to create new content. Many popular platforms, such as ChatGPT and Perplexity, are what's known as large language models, or LLMs, which consume vast amounts of data in order to formulate a response. The technology is predictive: When you are chatting with AI, it's predicting the most likely response based on what it has "learned."

"They're kind of amazingly good at it," Steven Skiena, associate director of Stony

Brook University's AI Innovation Institute, said. Tell AI to write an English paper, and it will ask itself, "what's the next word, and what's the next word?" Skiena explained. "Eventually you'll get a document."

To produce visual content, many AI platforms rely on a process called diffusion. If you tell AI to generate an image of a cat, it will begin with random visual noise — think television static — then remove the noise little by little until a recognizable image emerges. Within the static it may find a vague oval and two triangles, which gradually develop into a cat's body with two ears and so on. The diffusion process is, again, predictive: After looking through billions of images, AI comes up with something similar.

"AI is what people call it, but I think of it as basically things that involve computing,"

Skiena explained. "You're getting computers to do things that seemingly would require human intelligence to do."

HOW IS THE ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY USING AI?

"I think the whole industry is interested in AI, but for different reasons," said Jake Kanter, who covers AI in his column Rendering for the trade publication Deadline. Studios tend to look at the technology as a cost-cutter, he explained, while actors and writers seem more ambivalent about its potential.

"They're trying to grapple with the fact that these tools exist," Kanter said, "and trying to figure out if they can tell stories that embrace these tools and allow them to do things that they might not be able to achieve otherwise."

So far, AI is making inroads into pre- and postproduction,

Every year they got better and better, and suddenly at one moment, my God, they could do amazing things.'

— Steven Skiena, associate director of Stony Brook University's AI Innovation Institute, on AI

according to a recent report from consulting group McKinsey & Co. The technology is helping speed up unglamorous tasks like making prop lists and shot lists, but it can also be used to add effects to completed films, according to the report. "The Brutalist," Brady Corbet's Oscar-winning drama from 2024, used an AI program to strengthen the Hungarian accents of its lead actors. Netflix last year enhanced an episode of the Argentine sci-fi series "The Eternaut" with an AI-generated sequence of a collapsing building, the company's first-ever use of the technology in a production, according to co-CEO Ted Sarandos.

"The cost of it just wouldn't have been feasible for a show in that budget," Sarandos told investors in July.

Such cost savings could be spent on making more movies. Once AI is widely adopted, according to McKinsey, Hollywood could see a redistribution of "up to \$60 billion of annual revenue within five years."

CAN AI WRITE SCRIPTS?

In 2024, the website No Film School hosted a challenge to see who could write the better screenplay: a professional screenwriter or AI. Each submitted a 10-page sample that was judged by an online poll.

The human, Jason Hellerman, of Los Angeles, won by a margin of less than 1%.

It's worth noting, though, that the AI was assisted by two human writers who revised its original pages. "You still have to have a person," Hellerman, 38, said of AI. "And it doesn't matter how many books it sucks in or screenplays it codifies. It will always be this sort of math-based interpretation of what it can scan on the page."

Even the co-founder of the AI writing tool Sudowrite, Amit Gupta, told the Los Angeles Times last year that AI by itself could not write a decent feature film. "You could watch it," he said, "but you're

not going to like watching it."

Paul Schrader, the acclaimed writer of "Taxi Driver" and "Raging Bull," surprised the screenwriting community last year when he praised AI's writing prowess on his Facebook account. "I'M STUNNED," he wrote. "I just asked ChatGPT for 'an idea for Paul Schrader film.' Then Paul Thomas Anderson. Then Quentin Tarantino." Schrader said the results were not just good but "original. And fleshed out. Why should writers sit around for months searching for a good idea when AI can provide one in seconds?"

WILL AI REPLACE ACTORS?

Perhaps no development in AI has drawn as much buzz — and backlash — as the AI-generated "actress" Tilly Norwood.

The creation of Eline van der Velden, a Dutch writer-performer who founded the AI company Particle6, Norwood looks like a young, vaguely European woman with wavy hair and a winning smile. After appearing in an Instagram account in early 2025, she made her acting debut in an online comedy short titled "AI Commissioner." Online controversy soon began simmering, but when van der Velden appeared at the Zurich Film Festival and said that Norwood might sign with a



The singer Grimes launched Elf.Tech, which allows the use of her AI-generated voice to make music in return for half the royalties.



Irish filmmaker Ruairi Robinson used a Chinese AI model to create a convincing video of Brad Pitt and Tom Cruise in a fight scene.

talent agency, Hollywood went ballistic.

Actresses from Melissa Barrera to Natasha Lyonne suggested boycotting any agency that signed Norwood. The actors' union SAG-AFTRA condemned Norwood as "not an actor" but an avatar that had been trained on real actors' work "without permission." Nevertheless, this past March Norwood released a defiant music video, "Take the Lead," in which she sang, "When they talk about me, they don't see/The human spark, the creativity."

"Tilly Norwood is a fantastic bit of marketing and not much else," Deadline's Kanter said,

Taylor Swift has taken steps to protect her work and person from AI copying, filing for several trademarks, including for her catchphrase.

though he added that she served a symbolic purpose. "She's kind of seen as the nemesis of any kind of creativity and human endeavor," he explained. "I think it was important for the industry to respond in the way it did."

In March came news that an AI-generated version of Val Kilmer, the "Top Gun" actor who died last year after battling throat cancer, would appear in an upcoming film titled "As Deep as the Grave." Kilmer had been cast years ago but was then too ill to work, writer-director Coerte Voorhees explained in a recent Variety article. "Despite the fact some people might call it controversial," Voorhees said, "this is what Val wanted."

The film is being made with the blessing of Kilmer's family. After a trailer featuring the actor's likeness drew online criticism, his daughter, Mer-

cedes Kilmer, appeared on "Today" to defend the family's support. "My dad was very passionate that this is the time, before these laws are written, to make sure that there's a structure for compensation," she said. "I think this is a really historic precedent."

CAN AI MAKE MUSIC?

One of the first AI pop artists to make headlines was Xania Monet, who last September debuted on the Billboard Hot Gospel and Hot R&B song charts. A multimillion-dollar bidding war reportedly followed, ending with Monet signing to Hallwood Media. But Monet is really the creation of a human, Telisha "Nikki" Jones, who writes 90% or more of Monet's lyrics and uses the AI platform Suno to help generate the music.

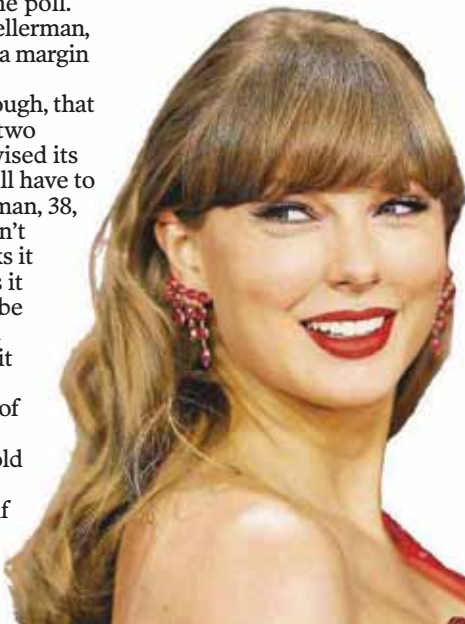
"It's the new era that we're in," Jones told CBS News last year. "And I look at it as a tool, as an instrument, and utilize it."

Another headline-making AI star is Breaking Rust, whose country-blues ballad "Walk My Walk" reached No. 1 on Billboard's Country Digital Song Sales chart last year. That may sound impressive, but in today's streaming era "it only takes a few thousand purchases to top" that sales chart, Andrew R. Chow wrote at In the Loop, an AI newsletter for Time magazine. Still, Breaking Rust (possibly the creation of a producer named Aubierre Rivaldo Taylor) has more than 1.1 million monthly listeners on Spotify.

Meanwhile, the singer named Grimes has launched Elf.Tech, a program that allows the use of her AI-generated voice in return for a 50/50 split on royalties. At a U.S. Senate Judiciary subcommittee in 2024, singer FKA twigs called for stringent AI copyright protections but also said that she had created a deepfake of herself to interact with fans online "whilst I continue to focus on my art." Taylor Swift recently filed multiple trademark applications, seemingly aimed at outmaneuvering AI, including for her cheery catchphrase, "Hey, it's Taylor."

WHO'S BENEFITING?

The AI boom has drawn comparisons to the dot-com bubble, with companies burning through cash infusions even as profits remain elusive. OpenAI, the maker of ChatGPT, recently completed a round of funding to reach a valuation of \$852 billion



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AI from C5

although it has yet to turn a profit, according to CNBC. Anthropic, the maker of Claude, in April reportedly began looking for funding that would raise its valuation to a staggering \$900 billion.

In Hollywood, some famous but surprising figures have gotten into AI. "South Park" creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone founded the AI visual effects company Deep Voodoo way back in 2020; it helped de-age Billy Joel by several decades in his 2024 music video for "Turn the Lights Back On." In March, Netflix announced it had acquired InterPositive, an AI studio quietly founded by Ben Affleck in 2022. The cost: a reported \$600 million. In a statement, Affleck said his company had built a model that could "understand visual logic and editorial consistency, while preserving cinematic rules under real-world production challenges such as missing shots, background replacements or incorrect lighting."

One intriguing partnership, announced in December 2025, was between Disney and OpenAI, maker of the text-to-video model Sora. According to terms of the deal, a three-year licensing agreement would allow Sora users to generate their own videos featuring any of 200 Disney, Marvel, Pixar and "Star Wars" characters; the videos would then be available to stream on Disney+. "As part of the agreement, Disney will make a \$1 billion equity investment in OpenAI," the technology company said in a statement. Three months later, however, OpenAI announced plans to shut down Sora and Disney pulled out of the \$1 billion deal, according to Variety.

HOW GOOD IS AI GETTING?

"The progress," Stony Brook's Skiena said, "has been incredible."

Skiena notes that AI is a field that dates back to the 1950s, when hulking mainframes spat out punch cards. Historical milestones include ELIZA, an early chatbot-cum-psychoanalyst of the mid-1960s, and Deep Blue, the IBM chess-playing supercomputer that beat the Russian champion Garry Kasparov in 1997. In the 21st century, advances in "deep learning" have allowed AI to better mimic the functioning of a human brain and operate at an increasingly sophisticated level.

"Every year they got better and better," Skiena said, "and



Tilly Norwood is an AI-generated "actress" created by Particle6 founder Eline van der Velden.

suddenly at one moment, my God, they could do amazing things."

After ChatGPT's debut in late 2022 came a boom in generative AI, much of it devoted to creating video. For an example of how fast AI is progressing, consider the famous prompt "Will Smith eating spaghetti," which has become an informal benchmark for AI users. An early attempt in 2023 resulted in a painfully deformed version of the actor inhaling nauseating amounts of pasta; subsequent attempts featured popped-out eyes or melting forks. Today, user-friendly video models can generate utterly realistic images of Smith noshing on tasty-looking noodles. They can also replicate his voice, sync his dialogue and edit multiple angles into a professional-looking montage.

"We have been making tools, systems and models that power the idea that you can go from zero to a feature film completely AI-generated," Alejandro Matamala Ortiz, who co-founded the video platform Runway in 2018, said. The company has since gained access to the content catalog of Lionsgate studio, and Matamala Ortiz said Runway is currently being used by several teams to create completely AI-generated feature films.

A frustrated filmmaker himself, Matamala Ortiz said Runway is "democratizing access" for others like him. "You can get very good results at a fraction of the time and a fraction of the cost, and with very great quality," he said. "And the main difference is that, until not long ago, only a few people could access those resources."

WILL AI TAKE PEOPLE'S JOBS?

Almost certainly, according to Harry Winer, an arts professor at New York University's film school who teaches a new class called Generative Filmmaking in the Age of Hypercinema.

Behind-the-scenes types in Hollywood, such as line producers and budget managers, should be aware that AI can perform some of their functions quickly, cheaply and well, Winer said. That also goes for creative types like animators, who typically draw dozens of images for a single scene. "Now you give it a beginning image and ending image, and AI just fills in what lies between," Winer said.

He also pointed to the crucial area of screenplay assessment, known as "coverage." Traditionally, coverage has fallen to young assistants who skim hundreds of screenplays, flag the few gems and provide notes on everything from story structure to marketing potential. AI can be "pretty effective" at coverage, Winer

acknowledged. "They're not the same as a human evaluation of the marketplace, but for people who are looking to cut corners and eliminate an employee, there's one target."

Still, AI requires human supervision and will most likely create new jobs, Winer predicted. Education and training for workers will be key in the coming years, he said, "no different from the diminishing coal industry, trying to retrain those people."

WHO'S FIGHTING BACK?

Artists and creatives have launched efforts to restrict the use of AI. Since AI pulls from essentially anything and everything that's online, creatives are concerned about copyright protection, royalties and compensation.

When the Writers Guild of America struck against the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers in May 2023, AI was top of mind for the guild's 11,500 members. The 148-day strike resulted in several contractual stipulations, including that writers' work should not be used to train AI, that AI content is not valid "source material" and that AI should not be considered a "writer" at all.

"A computer is not a person," WGA member Hellerman insisted. "AI is the lazy route. The best part of writing is how hard it is."

SAG-AFTRA, the actors' union, launched its strike two months later. "We are all going to be in jeopardy of being replaced by machines," union president Fran Drescher said at a news conference, according to CNN. One major fear among the

union's rank-and-file members: showing up as an extra, getting scanned, then being digitally reproduced in future movies without pay. Ultimately, actors wrested several contractual concessions regarding "synthetic performers," including that an actor's likeness cannot be used without permission and that producers must notify the union before replacing a human actor with an AI-generated one.

Musicians have also mobilized. The Recording Academy, which bestows the Grammys, advocated for a handful of bills in 2024, including Tennessee's ELVIS Act (short for Ensuring Likeness, Voice and Image Security), and the U.S. Senate's NO FAKES Act (Nurture Originals, Foster Art and Keep Entertainment Safe). That same year, Artists Rights Alliance, a non-profit advocacy organization, issued an open letter signed by more than 200 musicians — from Billie Eilish to Stevie Wonder — asking AI developers not to create "tools that undermine or replace the human artistry of songwriters" or "deny us fair compensation for our work."

WHERE DOES AI GO FROM HERE?

Even beyond Hollywood, there are signs of an AI backlash.

One of the first fully AI-generated commercials, released by Coca-Cola during the 2024 Christmas season, drew widespread mockery online for its glitchy visuals and soulless feel, though the company has since released others. AI videos have become so easy to generate, and so ubiquitous on social media, that they're now dismissed as "AI slop." Meanwhile, younger generations "consistently lean toward discomfort" regarding the use of AI in entertainment, according to a new report from the analytics firm Luminate.

"None of my students want to be identified or have their projects screened because the pushback on social media is so destructive," Winer, the AI film teacher, said. Ironically, he added, "They want to avoid any association with AI whatsoever."

Despite the polarizing reactions, "AI is a tool, and it's not inherently moral or immoral," according to Colin Goldberg, an East End native and visual artist who in 2020 founded an AI-friendly movement called Techspressionism. "I believe the term AI will go away, and it'll just be part of what we call computing," he predicted. "Nobody says, 'I'm using my handheld microprocessor.' It's just a phone."



Actor Ben Affleck founded InterPositive, an AI studio that was acquired by Netflix for a reported \$600 million.

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