

Is AI the future of Hollywood? How the hype squares with reality

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For every problem you can think of, someone is out there pitching a solution that involves artificial intelligence. AI could help solve such intractable problems as climate change and dangerous work conditions,

the technology's most eager boosters promise.

It could even fix the much-maligned "Game of Thrones" finale, if you believe one of the industry's most powerful proponents and a featured speaker at this month's South by Southwest conference.

"Imagine if you could ask your AI to make a new ending that goes a different way," said Greg Brockman, president and co-founder of OpenAI, the research group behind the conversation software ChatGPT and the image-generation module DALL-E. "Maybe even put yourself in there as a main character or something, having interactive experiences."

Rewriting an HBO show so that your digital likeness can slay dragons might seem a little frivolous for a technology as hyped-up as [artificial intelligence](#). But it's an application that's getting a lot of attention, including at South by Southwest (or SXSW), the annual tech and culture expo that overran Austin, Texas, this last week with film nerds, celebrities and venture capitalists.

Throughout the conference, attendees imagined what chatbots, deep-fakes and content-generating software will mean for [creative industries](#).

At a live podcast taping titled "Generative AI: Oh God What Now?" two technologists pondered how many creativity-driven jobs will get taken over by machines. In a "Shark Tank"-esque pitch session, entrepreneurs proposed new ways to integrate AI into entertainment, such as by splitting audio stems or visualizing film scripts automatically. A SoundCloud executive told another audience that people who categorically reject AI-generated music sound "a bit like the synthesizer haters" of electronic music's early days.

And it's not just SXSW attendees and speakers who are excited about the space. According to the market-research firm PitchBook, venture

capitalists have signed 845 AI-related deals worth a total of \$7.1 billion so far this year, despite a tech market that's otherwise flailing.

In Los Angeles, home to the [entertainment industry](#) and a growing tech sector, firms are already looking to bring artificial intelligence to the Hollywood production cycle. Santa Monica-based Flawless has focused on using deep-fake-style tools to edit actors' mouth movements and facial expressions after principal photography has wrapped. Playa Vista's Digital Domain is bringing the technology to bear on stunt work.

"AI could be an amazing tool to help democratize a lot of the aspects in filmmaking," said Tye Sheridan, an actor who's starred in such films as "Ready Player One" and the rebooted X-Men series. "You don't need a bunch of people or a bunch of equipment or a bunch of complicated software with expensive licenses; I think that you're really opening the door to a lot of opportunity for artists."

Along with VFX artist Nikola Todorovic, Sheridan founded Wonder Dynamics, a West Hollywood-based company focused on using AI to make motion capture easier.

In a demo Sheridan and Todorovic showed The Times prior to their own SXSW panel, the software took an early scene from the James Bond movie "Spectre"—of Daniel Craig walking dramatically along a rooftop in Mexico City—and scrubbed out the actor to replace him with a moving, gesturing CGI character. The benefits, to Sheridan, are straightforward.

"I mean, you don't have to wear those silly-looking motion capture outfits anymore, do ya?" Sheridan said.

But for all the hype, some remain skeptical, wondering how much of the excitement is venture capital-fueled froth.

It was only a year ago, at SXSW 2022, that technologists seemed all in on crypto. But soon enough, crypto values plummeted, regulators cracked down and industry mainstays imploded. Even the metaverse—the other "next big thing" Silicon Valley's been pitching in recent years—has thus far proven underwhelming.

It doesn't help that the tech entertainment space has its own trail of unfulfilled promises. Remember 360-degree virtual-reality movies? Remember 3D TVs?

The rise of AI in writing has also raised concerns by unions representing screenwriters, who fear studios might replace experienced TV and film scribes with software. This year, the Writers Guild of America will demand studios regulate the use of material produced by artificial intelligence and similar technologies as part of negotiations for a new pay contract this year.

"We've been through various hype cycles before, not only with AI but other kinds of technological innovations," said David Gunkel, a professor of media studies at Northern Illinois University who focuses on the ethics of emerging technologies. "And so the smart thinking is always to be careful about how much prognostication you make about radically changing anything, because in some cases that doesn't happen."

Even if the general AI hype is warranted, the question of what impact this rapidly emerging field will have on the entertainment industry specifically is a pricklier one, in part because it prompts questions about creativity, originality and artistic providence that don't come up when a program makes, say, an interview transcript or a dinner reservation.

The standard of true artificial creativity hasn't yet been met by entertainment-oriented AI, said Harvard Business School professor Teresa Amabile. Pointing to Alan Alda's recent effort to have ChatGPT

write him a new scene of "M*A*S*H," Amabile noted via email that the software required substantial input from Alda, and even then produced dialogue that was alternately incoherent or unfunny.

"That doesn't mean that AI will never be able to produce a truly funny sitcom script or a masterfully moving film score," she said. "But it will have to be a different kind of AI. We're not there yet, and I don't think we will be soon. In my opinion, anyone who claims to know when and how that will happen is engaging in either deception or wishful thinking."

Yet artificial intelligence's potential impact seems hard to deny. Generative programs such as DALL-E and ChatGPT have, in the span of a few months, exploded into the mainstream, filling social media feeds with machine-made images and bagging interviews that many a PR rep would envy for their human clients.

AI also doesn't demand that users set up a complicated crypto wallet or buy a pricey VR headset to understand the appeal, and the technology is rapidly being integrated into search engines and social media apps.

"Crypto and [the] metaverse were two big trends that I think Silicon Valley and the tech industry were hoping would be massive waves," BuzzFeed Chief Executive Jonah Peretti said onstage at SXSW. His company has started integrating artificial intelligence into its personality quizzes. "I think that AI is just a much, much better wave, in the sense that it is producing so many more useful things."

"You don't think ... we're just churning through these fake trends until interest rates go up?" asked his interviewer, former New York Times media columnist Ben Smith.

No, said Peretti, this isn't another bubble destined to pop. The rise of AI

is more akin to mobile phones or social media: "massive trends that changed the economy and society and culture."

Amy Webb, chief executive of the Future Today Institute consulting firm, is broadly bullish on AI's transformative potential. In a trends report her firm just published, AI was the only tech vertical out of 10 for which its predicted impact was color-coded lime green—that is, imminently relevant—for every industry they tracked, including entertainment.

Webb ponders a world in which artificial intelligence programs are used to mass-produce many different versions of a single TV pilot, either to focus-test them before release or to show different ones to different viewers after.

"I bet sometime in the next handful of years that there becomes this horrible industry practice where you have to have multiple variations before things are greenlit," Webb said in an interview. "And then there's a, like, predictive algorithm that tries to determine which version has the highest likelihood of grossing the most [money]."

As much promise as AI holds—and as eager as many SXSW panelists were to herald its all-encompassing arrival—some industry insiders caution against expecting too much, too soon from the technology.

A lot of the AI tools that have hit the mainstream in the past few months look fine on a Twitter feed but may not stand up to closer scrutiny, said Todorovic, the VFX-artist-turned-AI-entrepreneur. "Some of these things where you're just thinking, 'Oh, I'll just type this, I'll generate the whole movie'—I think it's more like ... you get a concept of it and you can go and work on top of it."

"It's a bit of a hype," he added, "thinking that you're just gonna replace

all these artists." .

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