

Taste Is All That's Left

📅 Published August 6, 2026 | ⌚ 16 min read | </> Source

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Post Mortem

Hey. I've been kindly informed that this post has hit the front page of Hacker News, and combing through the comments, I've come to see that it reads as what I'd call, well, AI slop. If this is a concern of yours, please honor me with a quick glance at the [post-mortem](#) section below. Thanks!

For most of the time I have been writing software—which, compared to some of my readers, is not that long—I have come to believe that the hard thing was making the thing exist *at all*. This is not necessarily a

new belief of mine. I came up through the difficult and tedious experience of building web applications and watching them crash and burn.

You had an idea, and between the idea and the working program stood hours— sometimes weeks—of typing, of reading manuals, of misunderstanding an API and slowly grinding the wrong version into a slightly less wrong one. Production was the wall. Everyone hit it. It was the thing that separated the people who *could* from the people who could only talk about it.

That wall is gone. Or rather, it has been rented out. ¹ You can describe a thing now and receive a plausible version of it much faster than you could have typed the first function by hand. The idea-to-artifact distance, the one that defined the entire craft, has collapsed to almost nothing.

Though, you have not been warned about one little thing: the value you built by learning to climb that wall does not disappear. It simply... *moves*.

The Bar Went Somewhere

We keep asking whether the machines are any good. Even yesterday I had a rather short discussion on whether they are reliable. While we have concluded that they are “reliably unreliable,” I think it is the wrong question. The output is good enough, generally anyway, and that is the problem—most of it, at least. Good enough is a *solvent*. It dissolves the reason to do better. For as long as making things was expensive, the expense did quiet work on our behalf. It rationed output. It meant that anything which existed had, at minimum, survived the cost of being made. You know what I mean? Effort was a *filter*, and like all filters it was invisible until it was removed. Nobody shipped a thousand mediocre variations of a feature, because a thousand mediocre variations cost a thousand times as much as one. The economics enforced a floor.

That floor is now gone. And when the floor goes, the thing that decides what is worth keeping is no longer the cost of making it. It is you. Your judgement. The verdict you reach when you look at three plausible versions of the same function and know, somehow, that two of them are wrong. That verdict has a name we are slightly embarrassed to use in engineering circles, because it sounds soft and unfalsifiable and vaguely aristocratic.

Taste.

What Taste Actually Is

I want to be careful here, because “taste” is doing a lot of work and it is easy to hear it as decoration. A matter of preferences. Whether you like your braces on the same line.

That is not what I mean.

Robert Pirsig spent an entire book circling a word he refused to define, because he had convinced himself that defining it would kill it. He called it *Quality*. His argument, roughly, was that you recognise Quality before you can explain it—that the recognition comes first and the reasons arrive later, if they arrive at all. A good mechanic knows the engine is wrong before he knows why. A good editor feels the sentence sag before she can name the clause that failed. ²

Taste is that. It is the compressed, wordless verdict you reach faster than you can justify. It is partially ³ the “no, again” you say to yourself with total conviction and no available argument. And it is not soft at all. It is the hardest thing in the work, because it is the only part that was never mechanical to begin with.

Everything downstream of the verdict—the typing, the syntax, the wiring of one library to another—was always, in principle, automatable. We just had not gotten around to it. The verdict *was the thing the machine could not do for you*.

It still cannot. It can only make the absence of it cheaper to ignore.

Taste Is Downstream of Friction

The mechanism underneath this is one I would rather not think about.

Where did your taste come from?

No really. Where did it come from? Was it genetic? Were you abducted by aliens one day that forcefully injected your sense of taste into your mind and wiped your memory of what just happened?

I’ll tell you this much: it’s not from consuming good work. You cannot read a hundred excellent programs and absorb the judgement by osmosis, any more than you can become a chef by eating in good restaurants. Taste is built the slow, stupid, humiliating way: you make something bad, you are forced to

live with it, it fails in front of you, and some part of you files the failure away. Then you do it again. The palate is an accretion of your own mistakes, sat with long enough to sting.

The friction was not an obstacle to developing taste. The friction was the *curriculum*. Every wall I cursed while climbing it was, without my noticing, teaching me which walls were worth climbing. The cost that rationed my output also educated my judgement, because paying the cost over and over is how you learn what is worth paying for.

So watch what happens when you remove the friction for the next person.

They can generate fluently from the first day. They will never ship the bad version and be forced to sit in it, because the tool offers them a competent version for free. They will climb no wall, and so they will learn nothing from the climb. They will arrive at fluency having skipped the entire apprenticeship that fluency used to require—and they will be *more* productive than I was at their stage, by every metric anyone bothers to measure.

They will be able to make anything, and unable to tell (or stop to think) whether they should. Not necessarily through any fault of their own. We removed the part of the process that would have taught them, and we called it progress, and by most definitions it *was*.

The Economics Are Against You

Suppose you have taste. Suppose you paid the full price and you can feel the sag in the sentence and the wrongness in the function.

Congratulations! You now ship at exactly the same speed as the person who cannot.

This is the quiet cruelty of the situation and I do not have a comforting way to phrase it. Taste is slow. It says “no, again.” It sends the plausible thing back because plausible is not the same as right, and while it is doing that, the person without it has already shipped, closed the ticket, and moved on. The market timed you both with the same stopwatch and it did not see the difference. It cannot see the difference. Taste does not show up in the diff.

It is unmeasurable, uncreditable, and invisible on a dashboard. You cannot point to the disasters it prevented, because prevented disasters leave no trace. You carry a cost—the extra hours, the returned

work, the refusal to ship the fine thing when the right thing is still reachable—and you carry it alone, against an incentive gradient that runs the other way.

Harry Frankfurt once drew a careful line between the liar and the bullshitter. The liar at least respects the truth enough to work against it. The bullshitter does not care about the truth in either direction; he is simply indifferent to it. ⁴ Slop is the bullshit of engineering. It is not wrong, exactly. It is *indifferent*. It works, it passes, it is fine. And fine, produced without friction and shipped without judgement, is now the most abundant substance in the field.

The Flood

Sturgeon said it decades ago, defending science fiction from a critic: ninety percent of everything is crap. ⁵ He meant it as consolation. Ninety percent of every field is bad, so do not judge the field by its bulk. But the ratio was never the danger. It held steady for centuries. What held the flood back was that producing the crap *cost something*. Bad novels still took a year to write. Bad software still took a month to build. The ninety percent was throttled at the source by the sheer inconvenience of making it.

We have now removed the throttle and left the ratio intact. Ninety percent of an infinite output is still infinite. The signal did not get worse. The noise became free, and free noise rises without limit, and every real thing you make now arrives into a sea of plausible nothing that looks, at a glance, exactly like it.

Which means the scarce act is no longer making. It is *choosing*. Deciding what, out of the endless generated plausible, deserves to exist and be kept. Curation was a minor virtue when things were expensive to make. It is the whole game when they are free.

What Deserves to Exist

There is a rhyme here, if you go back far enough.

When the factories came, they could suddenly make *everything*—cheaply, uniformly, by the thousand. ⁶ And a handful of people, Morris and Ruskin among them, looked at the flood of cheap identical goods and asked a question that sounded, at the time, sentimental and doomed: not *can* we make this, but *should* this be made, and made this way, by no one, for no reason but that the machine could.

They lost the economic argument. They were always going to. But they were right about the thing that mattered, which is that when the making becomes free, the *choosing* becomes the craft. The human question stops being “can I build it” and becomes “does this deserve to exist”—and that question was always the more serious one. We just could not afford to ask it while we were busy climbing walls.

This turn is not consolation but a correction.

The tools did not devalue the skill. They stripped away everything that *was not* the skill. All those years I thought the work was the production—the typing, the wiring, the wall—and production turns out to have been the toll. The tax you paid for the privilege of exercising judgement. Now the tax is close to zero, and what is left standing, exposed, with nowhere to hide, is the judgement itself. The part that was always the point.

Taste did not become less valuable. It became the *only* thing that was ever scarce. We just could not see it, because it was buried under all the labour it used to take to get to it.

A Defense, Then

So here is the defense, such as it is.

Anyone can generate now. That race is over and it was never worth winning. The discipline that remains—the one the machine cannot rent to you, and the dashboard cannot see—is in the deletion. In the “no, again.” In caring about the difference between *fine* and *right* when nothing external will ever reward you for caring, when the market has timed you and shrugged, when the plausible version sits there working and passing and asking only to be let through.

Refuse it anyway. Not out of nostalgia for the friction—I do not miss the wall, and I will not pretend to. Refuse it because the verdict is the last part of this that is actually yours. It is unmeasurable, which means no one can take it from you by measuring it. It is unautomatable, which means no one can sell it back to you. It is slow, which in a field optimising for infinite speed is starting to look less like a handicap and more like the only remaining evidence that a human was here and gave a damn.

Everyone can make anything. Almost no one can tell you what is worth making.

That was always the harder skill. It is now the only one left.

Post-Mortem

On Language

This post reads as AI slop. You said it, I see it. I'm sincerely sorry for publishing something that has allowed you to feel this way. If my word means anything to you, I would like to assure you that this post was *not* authored by a LLM. Nor was it storyboarded, reviewed, checked, etc. by one. Some readers have pointed out that people do not speak this way. That is correct. I do not speak, nor *usually* write, like this, and this post will go down as not my proudest. However, I take your criticism to heart—although not personally—and strive to improve.

I do write like this sometimes. The short sentences, the reversals, the one-word lines—all of it. They're mine, and it's just the way it is. A LLM writes that way too, because it was trained on the same essays I have been reading, so me doing it badly and a machine doing it look about the same to you on the page. That says something about my writing. It says nothing about who wrote it.

So let me be plain about it: Claude was not here. No LLM wrote this—not a sentence of it, nor was it outlined, drafted, reviewed, checked, etc. by one, and there is no prompt behind it either. It is just me, writing worse than usual. I will write the next one plainer. Next time, write to me. I too am a person behind this screen.

In Appreciation

Be assured that I have read all of your comments—the good and the bad. As with my previous post that reached Hacker News, I've received *many* insightful ones. Whether it was people sharing their experience, or negative comments with the decency to criticize with substance, I have learned something new today—for which I am thankful.

On Taste

I do not care about your taste. If this post has offended you, then it says more about you than it does about me. As they say, *“throw an insult on the ground, its owner will pick it up”*—this one I am not sorry about.

Footnotes

1. There is an older word for this arrangement. You no longer own the means of production; you rent them, by the token, from whoever trained the model. An English teacher of mine—a committed socialist—would have had the whole thing diagrammed on the board before I finished the sentence: the worker separated first from his tools, then from the labour itself, then sold a frictionless substitute for the labour and told this was liberation. He would also, I suspect, have been the first to note the one part of the process that cannot be rented back to you, because it never left your head. Draw your own conclusions about which part that is. 
2. *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, if you have not read it. It is about a great deal more than motorcycles, and almost nothing about Zen. 
3. Someone will (and has!) object that taste is not *only* the “no, again”—that compressing it to a verdict makes the work sound like leaning back in a chair and rejecting things while the machine does the labour. The objection is fair, which is why the sentence above says *partially*. The “no, again” is the shorthand, not the whole of it. The verdict lives *inside* the work—in the data structures that have to actually scale, in the privacy you have to actually mean, in the function you rewrite a fourth time because the third was merely fine. Taste is not the chair you lean back in. It is the reason you lean forward into all the rest of it. 
4. *On Bullshit*. Frankfurt, 2005, though the essay is older. Yes, that is the real title. 
5. Now called Sturgeon’s Law, or Sturgeon’s Revelation. He put it in print in his book-review column in *Venture Science Fiction*, March 1958, after years of using it to rebut critics who judged the whole genre by its worst examples. 
6. A fair pushback I got: this makes the factory sound like it fell out of the sky, some magical “good enough” that arrived one day fully formed. It did not. The factory is itself a monument of taste and labour—someone tuned every tolerance and is still in there tuning them, and the same is true of the model you are renting by the token. So I am not saying the box is magic. I am saying the box moved the taste up a level: out of the making, and into the deciding of what is worth making at all. Which is the whole argument. 

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