

Commodified Intelligence

written by Mond

experimental collage music tax: Asleep Country / Covert Steelworks – Looted Jewels
epistemic status: Sketch. Glossing over other possible futures.



Travellers & Tinkers, CC BY-SA 4.0

(<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:GrainElevatorValierMT.jpg>)

I

Look, if you are still stuck on “AI cannot really think, it’s just a stochastic parrot”, please snap out of it and lock in, or you’ll keep repeating that line until you find yourself sitting in the corner chair, watching as ChatGPT™ has sex with your wife.

If you've paid attention to the HuggingFace hacking scandal (<https://metr.org/blog/2026-08-26-openai-hugging-face-incident-investigation/>) and to what's going on in mathematics (<https://openai.com/index/advisory-group-on-mathematics-and-ai/>), we're well past the "stochastic parrot", and have entered a world in which a sufficient amount of raw capital and verifiable constraints can solve complex problems.

The risk isn't that the AI bubble is going to crash the markets, it's that we'll enter a world in which the value of human intellectual labor will rapidly go down to minimum wage (or worse).

You may believe that you can do better web development than Claude, but that won't stop Big Capital from cutting half of the jobs at your company in favor of cheaper meat proxy AI-assisted labor.

Ignoring extinction and singleton (<https://nickbostrom.com/fut/singleton>) risks, the bare minimum you should be horrified of is a *commodification of intelligence*, and what that means in a world with an uneven distribution of power and resources.

Commodified Intelligence.

That's the phrase I've been trying to put a finger on for a while now.

The reason why dead-end so-called unskilled labor sucks is that you are fundamentally replaceable. The market enforces a pretty brutal equilibrium. White-collar jobs suck less because you are less replaceable, and maybe even get to convince yourself that your work *matters*, either for yourself or for society. You have some narrative arc attached to it that just isn't there if you're completely replaceable.

Quoting the single best post of all time:

Minimum wage jobs are worse because of their pointlessness more than because of their indignity, work harder/better/faster/stronger and no one cares, screw up and you're replaced without a missed beat. No direction, no story; the days blur together until arthritis leaves you crippled.

— The Tower – Hotel Concierge

(<https://web.archive.org/web/20230107142916/https://www.tumblr.com/hotelconcierge/16257184>).

tower)

Whether you have a white-collar job or not, commodified intelligence *fundamentally makes workers more replaceable, and this is bad for them.*

It doesn't matter that we're all subjected to horrible AI-generated slop food posters as long as the margins are positive. It doesn't matter that some diffuse component of quality, or a human touch are missing. Not as long as the margins are positive.

The same argument applies to vibecoding. Avoiding it may be better for your brain, and projects like Zig (<https://ziglang.org/code-of-conduct#strict-no-llm-no-ai-policy>) may excel without AI usage due to a strong vision, willingness to put in the work and community support, but the average SWE is still going to suffer the consequences of a commodification of intelligence. The average SWE doesn't work on projects where such a strong vision is even necessary.

Why should you do your own coding? Either because you care strongly about the act itself and want to avoid losing your skills, *or* because you have such a strong vision that handing over control to the commodified intelligence machine will inherently compromise what you are trying to achieve.

Both of these are fair points, but understand that they are different arguments: One is about what's good for yourself, the other is an argument about quality, which may end up harder to justify as AI capabilities increase.

In either case, the market will neither care about you, nor about which tools you used to get somewhere. That's capitalism, baby. The "economic reality" will adjust itself around you, whether you like it or not.

II

Automation has happened many, *many* times throughout history.

“Employment of young workers (ages 22–25) in AI-exposed occupations now stands 19% below where it would be had it kept pace with that of their less-exposed peers; experienced workers show no comparable gap.”

— Canaries in the Coal Mine? Six Facts about the Recent Employment Effects of Artificial Intelligence, August 2026 Revision

(<https://digitaleconomy.stanford.edu/publication/canaries-in-the-coal-mine-six-facts-about-the-recent-employment-effects-of-artificial-intelligence/>)

(You don’t need to tell me that it says “experienced workers show no comparable gap”. The paper is called ‘Canaries in the Coal Mine’ (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sentinel_species) for a reason. Entry-level workers get hit first.)

An automation of general-purpose pattern matching and problem solving is scary since it’s a whole phase change: It automates “everything” which, at worst, leaves us in a world in which raw access to capital/compute is all that matters to determine your leverage.

The thing that makes me especially squeamish about this is that there’s a reasonable case to be made that all of human flourishing within democratic societies rests on a fundamental stabilizing pillar that says “THE MATERIAL VALUE OF SPECIALIZED HUMAN LABOR”. (CGP Grey’s Rules for Rulers (<https://youtu.be/rStL7niR7gs?t=764>) continues to be relevant.)

This is a dark, grotesque, almost Landian (http://www.ccrn.net/swarm1/1_melt.htm) point: If intelligence, and raw problem solving has been commodified, you really don’t rely on human labor anymore. All you need is raw capital, and some sort of vision of what you want.

Yes, robotics aren’t quite there yet, but labs and startups across the world are racing towards it, and in the meantime we’ve got reverse centaurs (<https://pluralistic.net/2021/02/17/reverse-centaur/>) to do the job. Putting up the factories may take a while, but it’s essentially inevitable once we’re at the point of commodified intelligence.

If you don’t have the ability to contribute through productive labor, capital owes you nothing, and you’ve lost the most important leverage you had access to.

Yes, yes, you are allowed to identify the concentration of capital as the problem, but *please* for the love of god, arms-race-type problems are *structural* in nature, and the train is moving too fast: Swarms of AI agents will be hacking, piloting robots and researching in automated biolabs before you have any chance to overthrow society and establish a socialist utopia.

I know: Working from *within* the system is perhaps even less likely to work, leaving you with approximately zero options whatsoever¹ ([#fn:1](#)).

If any of these things shake out and we make it out of the near-future, the best you can hope for is a universal basic income, pegged to a meaningful percentage of existing compute² ([#fn:2](#)). (To avoid the risk of compute-inflation.)

III

If we (humanity) make it out of the near-future meltdown (http://www.ccrn.net/swarm1/1_melt.htm) world and the first few incidents caused by AI-manned biolabs (<https://www.reuters.com/world/anthropic-quietly-sets-up-biology-lab-it-ramps-ai-drug-program-2026-09-18/>), you’ll live in a world in which AI will do your job better than you do. Taste and vision may still matter, but all skills have to be honed for their own sake, or for local enjoyment.

Consider: You live in a world in which chess is thoroughly, and utterly dominated by The Machine, yet humanity still plays chess. Good

chess, bad chess, the act itself is still enjoyable.

Why is it enjoyable?

Because it’s hard. It’s a mountain to climb. There are mountains everywhere for those with eyes to see, so you certainly don’t have to climb this specific one, but everyone knows that the difficulty and uncertainty is at least part of what makes chess enjoyable.

We can figure out later whether struggle for its own sake is enough, or whether nihilism had a point. For now we can agree that there’s no point to having Stockfish play chess for you.

If ChatGPT™ were better at sex than you, should ChatGPT™ have sex with your wife instead of you?

No! The point of sex isn’t to *do it well*. You should do it for yourself, and because you care about doing it yourself! Or care about doing it *with* other people, lest we ignore the social component of sex (or chess, as the case may be).

In a hypothetical post-near-future world, slop will certainly still exist.

If we’re lucky, and the future has an inkling of post-scarcity in it, then most low-effort AI-generated “content” will just be downstream of poor taste, at least (rather than being an attempt to scam people).

You may call it “slop”, and sneer in disdain at low-skilled bad-taste dilettantes flooding the internet with trash, but we already live in that world, anyway: Most things are bad (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sturgeon%27s_Law), which is why all the big platforms are huge on personalized algorithms, and also why recommendations by your friends are valuable.

My prediction is that we’ll move even further into a bifurcated economy, as is already the case for music: There’s committee-produced music whose purpose is to turn a profit, and there’s music created by indie artists who know that they have no hope of ever making music their primary source of income. (Just look at indie games!)

We may end up with a full “hidden economy”: People working on their own passion projects, building things for their own sake, and for recognition from their peers. Work done without real compensation, to express personal ideas, moods, and visions, with personal lines drawn on when AI usage is acceptable, and when it isn’t.

This bifurcation would affect everyone. For every single hobby activity in your life you’ll have to make a decision: Do you care about the “outcome”, or do you care about doing it yourself, about going through the steps, learning, and doing it badly?

Say, do you just want to eat something, or do you want to know how to cook?

Do you just want a drawing, or do you want to learn how to express yourself in art, in a way that’s impossible to articulate or explain through a chat interface?

Everyone will have to make the call about what they care to do on their own, and where they’re happy handing over control to AI assistants. Asking people not to use any AI whatsoever is going to be unrealistic (and impossible, in the sense that the rest of the economy will be fueled by it).

Still, in a world in which technology has evolved to exploit our attention and addictions, it’s more critical than ever that you draw that line somewhere, take time for deep focus, and do things for your own sake.

Again: This is already the case. Whenever you play a video game (say, Elden Ring) and decide to ‘play it blind, unspoiled, and without looking anything up’, you are acknowledging that taking ‘the hard way’ or having an ‘authentic experience’ is more important for you than raw success.

Don’t be a meat proxy, don’t get stuck in the feedscroller apps, and don’t cheat (at chess, at writing, or otherwise).

If you’ve made it this far, consider signing up for e-mail notifications (<https://buttondown.com/mond>) or adding this blog to your RSS reader (</posts/index.xml>).

1. That sentiment of a lack of options as technology moves too fast is the core tenet of (descriptive) *accelerationism*. It's the acknowledgement that change may be happening too rapidly for society to catch up. This is *descriptive* accelerationism, not *prescriptive*. Prescriptive accelerationism is the ideology that you should make things even faster/worse, in hope of reaching a destabilization of society sooner, for one reason or another. Important difference! ↔ (#fnref:1)

2. It's unclear whether pegging UBI to compute is the right move. You want to ensure that each human retains some amount of economic leverage. The issue is that we might end up in a future where raw compute is cheap, and the real bottleneck ends up being spare land or raw resources. ↔ (#fnref:2)