

Enhancing Creative Agency in Human-AI Collaboration: Story Models and Critical Prompting in Design Fiction

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ABSTRACT

Integrating Generative AI into educational settings raises critical questions about creative agency. While AI tools can enhance ideation efficiency, concerns persist that they may diminish students' sense of authorship and critical judgment. This study examines how combining story models with prompting frameworks enhances creative agency in human-AI collaboration by comparing basic and critical prompting approaches. Twenty-five students completed two design fiction activities: one using basic narrative scaffolding and another incorporating strategic critical prompting organized around the Task, Format, Voice, and Context dimensions. Analysis revealed differences across four dimensions—engagement depth, creative insight generation, empathy development, and output quality. Findings illuminate a three-stage progression of agency: from basic initiation capabilities to strategic direction to metacognitive awareness of how choices shape AI behavior. A critical "credibility gap" emerged, in which participants distinguished AI-generated professional polish from authentic believability, suggesting that technical sophistication does not guarantee conceptual validity. Results demonstrate that structured prompting combined with story-based knowledge scaffolding can preserve human agency while leveraging AI capabilities, challenging both technophobic and uncritical approaches to AI integration in creative education.

Keywords: Generative AI; Creative agency; Design fiction; Human-AI collaboration; Prompting frameworks; Educational innovation

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INTRODUCTION

Research findings indicate that integrating Generative AI (Gen AI) into educational settings can support learning in ideation and prototyping, though the specific benefits reported vary by context. In art and design education, Gen AI tools have been shown to enhance students' creativity by providing diverse visual outcomes and enabling iterative refinement of ideas (Cotroneo and Hutson, 2023; Fathoni, 2023). In design ideation, Gen AI-based inspiration has been shown to improve the novelty, variety, and quantity of design ideas generated during the process (Kim and Maher, 2023). In entrepreneurship education, Gen AI has been proposed and piloted as a tool to support opportunity recognition, ideation, and business plan development (Bell and Bell, 2023). Tools such as ChatGPT, DALL-E 2, and Midjourney appear across these contexts.

Some of these findings highlight how Human-AI Collaboration can significantly enhance the efficiency of ideation and digital prototyping. Human teams can achieve faster iterations and lower costs by delegating tasks to AI, thereby accelerating innovation.

While there is evidence that the use of Gen AI tools can lead to efficiency gains and an increase in the quantity, variety, and novelty of ideas for the average user, it remains unclear how AI tools alter the way

creators formulate ideas (Epstein et al., 2023) and whether that alteration benefits or undermines students' creative skills. Emerging evidence points in both directions: generative AI can raise the perceived creativity of individual output, particularly for less experienced creators, while simultaneously narrowing the diversity of ideas produced across a group of users (Doshi and Hauser, 2024). This study does not assume that Gen AI's effect on creative skill is positive; it treats the direction of that effect as an open empirical question.

To better understand how Gen AI can alter students' creative workflows, this paper focuses on the use of narratives in design. By narratives we specifically mean short speculative stories in the sense of Pennington and Hastie's (1992) story model, rather than other uses of the term such as user personas or customer journey maps. Narrative approaches have long been used across design contexts, from product storytelling (Lupton, 2017) to design fiction and speculative design (Bleecker, 2009; Dunne and Raby, 2013), a literature we return to below.

Following Bruner (1985), we call this the narrative mode of thought, a way of reasoning organized around stories rather than formal argument, well suited to supporting speculation about plausible futures rather than establishing truth, and to scaffolding and retaining new knowledge (Schank and Berman, 2002).



Research on using Gen AI to improve storytelling abilities is limited, even more so in the context of design and product development. Available research shows that the use of Gen AI enhances narrative intelligence and writing self-efficacy (Pellas, 2023), fosters creative expression and literacy development in young learners (Yilmaz and Goktas, 2017), enhances emotional connection with users and clients (Reed and Dodson, 2023), and simplifies the content creation process and allows for customization (Antony and Huang, 2023).

In this paper, we report empirical findings showing that Gen-AI-supported storytelling can improve students' design concept creativity by increasing engagement, creative insight, empathy, and the quality of content generated through human-AI collaboration. We also show that our approach increases perceived agency when students use Gen AI. We achieve these results by structuring Human-AI collaboration through a combination of story models and critical prompting.

We contribute to the design of sustained, structured interactions with AI bots beyond typical prompt-engineering approaches. While more thoughtful and curated prompting typically improves the quality of Gen-AI bots' output, an emphasis on prompting reinforces the idea that students depend on the machine's output and may limit their ability to scaffold knowledge and question/revise the machine-generated output (Patel and Iandoli, 2026). When, instead, better prompting is combined with knowledge scaffolding based on story models, the subjects in our study not only reported a higher level of perceived agency but also experienced a better understanding of the boundaries between human and artificial agency. Within design research, this also extends design fiction (Bleecker, 2009; Dunne & Raby, 2013) beyond the finished artifact to the process of producing it, showing how the structure of the collaboration shapes whether the result is merely polished or genuinely credible.

In the next section, we outline the conceptual foundations of our approach. We then describe the experimental design and report qualitative data from an empirical study conducted on a sample of 25 students enrolled in an undergraduate User Experience Design course.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The question of whether AI increases or decreases humans' sense of agency is complex and multifaceted. Floridi (2025) characterizes AI as a form of AA (Artificial Agency). While AA exhibits sophisticated levels of interactivity, autonomy, and adaptability, it misses most of the traits of Intelligent Agency typical of humans and animals (Eshraghian, 2020). This distinction is crucial for integrating AI into pedagogy. Framing AI as AA helps students and teachers recognize the

boundaries between human and artificial agency, avoid anthropomorphic fallacies, maintain realistic expectations about what AI can do, and prevent students from over-relying on these tools.

We argue that the uneducated use of Gen AI leads to low agency; good prompting abilities support medium agency levels, whereas the combination of structured prompting and knowledge scaffolding techniques, such as story models, can push the combined agency to the co-creation level.

Following Pennington and Hastie (1992), a story model is a knowledge structure that organizes evidence and events into a coherent narrative rather than merely analyzing facts in isolation. It involves constructing a story based on evidence, personal knowledge, and expectations of complete stories to determine the best explanation. Narrative reasoning can be both retrospective and prospective. In both cases, the need for coverage (how much evidence the story explains) and coherence (consistency and plausibility) trumps veracity and objectivity. This is even more visible when stories are about possible futures: by definition, a story about the future cannot be true or false, only plausible or implausible.

Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (1978) helps explain why stories function as a knowledge-scaffolding mechanism. The theory posits that learning occurs when novel information is cognitively contiguous with existing knowledge. A credible story provides a frame to which new knowledge can be connected, either through integrating it into the narrative or by expanding the narrative itself (Introne et al., 2018). Finally, the emotional saliency of stories helps with information retention and recall.

Stories and storytelling are widely used in design and futures thinking to describe plausible scenarios and futures. Lupton (2017) presents several types of standard story models, such as using narrative arcs to capture users' emotional journey when facing a problem or using a product. A very basic and universal story structure includes the following elements: "(person) in (place) needs help doing (activity) because (motivation) despite (circumstances).

The activities in this study belong to the broader tradition of design fiction, a practice within speculative and critical design that uses fictional artifacts and narratives to make future technologies and their social consequences tangible and open to critique (Bleecker, 2009; Dunne & Raby, 2013). Design fiction differs from forecasting or scenario-based design (Carroll, 2000) in that its goal is not predictive accuracy but plausibility, using story to surface assumptions, values, and tensions that a purely technical description would leave implicit (Malpass, 2017). Our contribution to this tradition is to examine how the fictional artifacts at the center of design fiction, such as AI-generated stories, are produced through structured human-AI collaboration, and how the

scaffolding provided to that collaboration shapes the plausibility and creative agency of the resulting fiction.

We argue that stories offer an effective mechanism to enhance the combination of human and artificial agency because of the following reasons:

- Gen AI can provide a surrogate sounding board to support the co-construction of stories through iterative prompting and revision. This surrogate co-creation enhances the collaborative nature of an LLM interface
- Reliability and safety: stories about the future are neither true nor false, and a future scenario is a hallucination by design. Unlike undesirable hallucinations, students do not need to focus on whether the information is true or accurate and remain in charge of determining if the scenario is valuable for their design purposes
- Ethical dimension: a focus on desirable futures triggers the ethical evaluation of future scenarios
- Intentionality and empathy: most stories emphasize human intentionality and overcoming circumstances. By building plausible stories, even with AI help, students retain focus and judgment on intentionality

While stories possess the desirable pedagogic characteristics listed above, their quality will still depend on students' ability to effectively communicate with and guide Gen AI bots to produce the desired outcomes. Effective prompting still fulfills this need. Consequently, we do not contrast the use of story models with thoughtful prompting; rather, we argue that they are complementary. Prompting increases students' effectiveness at articulating their thoughts in ways that are more suitable to algorithmic processing, while story models provide scaffolding and increase engagement and emotional validation. Thus, we hypothesize that the combined use of structured prompting and story models will be more effective than the use of story models alone to:

- Increase student engagement
- Favor creative insight and reframing
- Increase empathy toward future personas
- Increase the quality of AI-assisted creative output
- Preserve human agency and increase the effectiveness of Human-AI collaboration

STUDY DESIGN

We conducted a field experiment across two academic years (Fall 2024 and Fall 2025) with 25 participants, examining how different prompting frameworks affect human agency in AI-assisted creative work. While conducted in an educational context with undergraduate students enrolled in MIS courses, the research objectives center on understanding the fundamental dynamics of human-AI creative

collaboration applicable to professional creative practice more broadly. Each participant completed two design fiction activities separated by approximately two weeks, allowing within-subjects comparison of basic versus critical prompting approaches.

Activity 1: Story Model Framework

In the first activity, participants envisioned the future of books in 50 years. Using ChatGPT, each participant generated three short stories (approximately 250 words each) employing a basic narrative structure: "(person) in (place) needs help doing (activity) because (motivation)." Based on Lipman (1995), this framework provided minimal scaffolding, establishing fundamental story elements without directing participants toward critical analysis or strategic refinement. After generating stories, participants selected their most compelling narrative and wrote reflections on the creative process, design thinking impacts, and output characteristics.

Activity 2: Strategic Critical Prompting + Story Model Framework

The second activity focused on envisioning the future of food in 50 years, in 2075. Participants again generated three initial stories using the basic narrative framework, but then were instructed to select their most compelling story and refine it using what we termed critical prompting, which is organized around four dimensions: Task (employing action verbs like "reimagine," "transform," "predict"), Format (restructuring as product description, design brief, screenplay, etc.), Voice (adopting philosophical stance or notable author's style), and Context (considering specific stakeholder perspectives). Inspired by Bowen and Watson (2024), this critical prompting framework aimed to bridge creative storytelling with practical innovation while maintaining participant agency. Participants again reflected on their creative process and outcomes, enabling comparison of experiences with and without critical prompting.

MAIN RESULTS

Participant reflections were analyzed using thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify patterns in creative collaboration experiences across the two prompting approaches.

Coding was conducted by the two authors, and discrepancies were resolved through discussion. Analysis proceeded in two stages: an initial deductive pass organized responses against the five outcome dimensions anticipated by our hypotheses (engagement, creative insight, empathy, output quality, and agency), followed by an inductive, iterative pass within each dimension to identify recurring sub-themes, for example,

the credibility gap emerged inductively within the output-quality dimension, and to flag responses that diverged from the dominant pattern. Illustrative quotations were selected for their representativeness of a recurring pattern within a theme rather than for being the clearest or most favorable example; where a dimension produced mixed or conflicting responses, we note that variation explicitly (see, e.g., the section below on empathy) rather than presenting only convergent evidence.

To protect confidentiality, all participants are identified by two-letter codes (e.g., KD, MB) rather than their full names. These codes are assigned pseudonymously and do not correspond to participants' actual initials.

Analysis revealed systematic differences between basic and critical prompting across four key dimensions: 1) engagement, 2) creative insight generation, 3) empathy development, and 4) output quality. Additionally, findings illuminate how prompting frameworks fundamentally shape creative agency in human-AI collaboration.

1-Student Engagement

Participants demonstrated high engagement in both activities, evidenced by detailed reflections and sustained interaction with AI tools. However, the nature and depth of engagement evolved notably with the combination of storytelling and critical prompting. In Activity 1, participants expressed surprise and wonder at AI capabilities, often positioning themselves as recipients of unexpected creative depth. As one participant reflected: "What surprised me the most about working with AI to generate stories is the fact that it took my prompts and took them to levels that I personally could never really think of" (AP).

Activity 2 transformed this dynamic. Rather than passive surprise, participants developed meta-awareness of AI capabilities and their own strategic role. One participant noted: "What surprised me the most about working with AI this time is the precision it has in changing stories. The AI might struggle a little bit to get the initial idea, but once it fully understands your point, it's pretty easy to make the changes that you need or want" (FE). This shift from wonder at AI autonomy toward recognition of human control represents a reframing of the collaborative relationship.

Participants also articulated increased confidence and ownership with critical prompting: "Using specific prompts helped the story... It made me more confident in sharing my final story" (PI). The structured framework paradoxically enabled greater creative freedom by providing clear mechanisms to direct AI behavior, thereby alleviating concerns that AI would replace rather than amplify human creativity.

2-Creative Insights and Reframing

Both activities generated significant creative insights beyond participants' independent capabilities, but the depth and applicability of insights differed systematically. Activity 1 facilitated the discovery of novel technological possibilities and unexpected emotional connections to future users, whose reactions were not always what participants expected.

Activity 2 enabled deeper reframing that bridged creative speculation with practical innovation thinking. Participants articulated how critical prompting transformed narratives into actionable concepts: "The structured prompting did help bridge the gap between creative storytelling and practical innovation. The story evolved from a fictional moment into a believable product concept with market potential and real user benefits by focusing on task, format, and voice" (DA). This represents a critical shift for creative professionals, moving from imaginative exploration to innovation-ready conceptualization.

The reframing extended to participants' conception of the creative process itself. Activity 1 participants described AI as an autonomous creative force that either exceeded or fell short of expectations. Activity 2 participants reconceptualized AI as a strategic instrument requiring skillful orchestration: "It helped give the AI more direction and structure. It overall understood my prompt more than it typically would as it was more focused" (DW). This instrumental framing positions humans as directors rather than spectators in the creative collaboration.

3-Empathy Development

Both activities cultivated empathy for diverse users, but the character and scope of empathy evolved with critical prompting. Following Kouprie and Sleeswijk Visser (2009), we define empathy as the capacity to step into and out of another person's situation in order to understand their feelings, perspective, and needs, rather than a general sense of concern or awareness.

Activity 1 primarily generated empathy oriented toward preservation, that is, concern for those who might lose valued experiences in technology-dominated futures. Participants expressed worry about loss of tactile reading experiences, declining literacy, and diminished cognitive benefits: "I feel more empathetic toward future book users because books are a sort of escape from reality and an amazing way to retain information; however, the more we don't promote books, the more we lose that wonder and joy" (AP). This empathy was often grounded in specific emotional reasoning about future users' inner states rather than general awareness: "I also felt more empathy for future users because each scenario emphasized feelings such as confusion, frustration, and the desire for connection. This reminded me that even as technology advances, the human needs for understanding, autonomy, and belonging remain

important" (KD). Not all participants reported this shift. One participant described feeling less empathetic, framing anticipated technological gains as a net benefit rather than a loss: "This exercise made me feel less empathetic towards future book users because they will hopefully have an easier and more efficient way of searching for information than what we currently have" (MI).

Activity 2 broadened empathy toward concern oriented around innovation, that is, proactive consideration of diverse stakeholder needs in transformed futures. The strategic framework's emphasis on voice (philosophical perspectives) and context (stakeholder viewpoints) facilitated this shift. Participants articulated empathy across wider user groups and use contexts: "It helped me consider diverse perspectives from those living in poverty, to famous athletes, to even animals. It shows how much more personal of an experience food could be in the future" (DW). Others tied this directly to empathic concern for a specific loss: "The exercise did make me feel more empathetic towards future consumers as I feel bad that in the future people can lose the experience of picking food out as a choice of culture and enjoyment, and only do it for purely nutritional existence" (MI). Notably, this is the same participant who reported feeling less empathetic in Activity 1, suggesting critical prompting can produce a shift toward empathy within the same participant rather than only a difference between groups.

4- Output Quality

We follow Amabile's (1982) widely used definition of creative product quality, under which an output is judged along two components: novelty (originality and unexpectedness) and appropriateness (fit to the task and audience, including coherence and usefulness). For narrative work specifically, appropriateness also includes plausibility, since an implausible story fails its communicative purpose regardless of how novel it is. We use these two components to organize the comparisons below.

AI-generated outputs demonstrated high creativity and narrative quality in both activities, but critical prompting systematically addressed limitations observed in basic prompting. Activity 1 outputs exhibited some problematic patterns despite creative merit: technological repetition across stories (particularly overuse of holographic interfaces), utopian bias requiring explicit correction, and occasional elimination of physical elements.

Activity 2 outputs demonstrated enhanced structural coherence while maintaining creative vitality. Format prompting enabled participants to transform narratives into business-ready concepts: "The product description format allowed me to break the idea into specific components such as the bioluminescent produce, the bio-batteries, and the Glow Stack farming system" (DA). Voice prompting added philosophical depth and

emotional resonance: "Asking for the Karl Marx voice drastically changed the tone, pushing the story toward ideas about collective action, decentralization, and resistance to traditional power structures" (DA).

However, critical prompting revealed what we term the "credibility gap": a critical distinction between technical sophistication and authentic believability. While participants appreciated enhanced professional polish, several explicitly noted that refinement did not automatically increase story credibility. One participant articulated this: "I do not believe that the additional prompting increased the credibility of the story" (CO). Another echoed: "I'm not entirely sure if it did increase the credibility of the final story. I believe the story is still a little outlandish and abstract, but it did a decent job of making it seem believable" (AP).

The credibility gap we observe maps onto a distinction long established in narrative theory. Fisher (1984) argues that stories are judged by two independent standards: narrative coherence, whether a story hangs together as an internally consistent, well-structured account, and narrative fidelity, whether a story rings true and aligns with what an audience already knows and believes about the world. Structured prompting in Activity 2 primarily strengthened coherence; outputs became more polished, better organized, and more emotionally resonant, but coherence alone does not guarantee fidelity. Participants continued to judge some AI-generated outputs as implausible even when they were well constructed, consistent with Fisher's claim that a coherent story can still fail the test of fidelity. Framed this way, the credibility gap is not simply a limitation of AI-generated content but an instance of a general property of narrative judgment, in which structural quality and perceived truthfulness are evaluated separately.

This finding carries implications for creative professionals. It demonstrates that users can discriminate between polish and authenticity: dimensions that appear partially independent. For innovation work, this suggests AI-assisted outputs require additional human evaluation and refinement specifically targeting believability, even when technical quality appears high.

5-Impact on Creative Agency

Prompting framework fundamentally shaped participants' sense of creative agency, with implications extending beyond educational contexts to professional creative work. Agency manifested across two dimensions: perceived control over the creative process and navigation of uncertainty in AI collaboration.

Activity 1 positioned many participants as passive recipients rather than active directors of creativity. Participants frequently expressed surprise at AI capabilities in ways suggesting they viewed AI as an autonomous creative agent: "I was surprised by how creative it was" (CO). This positioning risks diminishing human creative authority, i.e., when practitioners

conceptualize AI as the creative source, they may experience decreased satisfaction despite productivity gains, paralleling recent industry research on creative professionals' ambivalence toward generative AI tools (Dell'Acqua et al., 2023; Wall Street Journal, 2026).

Activity 2 changed this dynamic through what we identify as a three-level progression of agency: basic, strategic, and metacognitive agency. Basic agency (ability to initiate AI interaction) characterized Activity 1 experiences. Critical prompting enabled strategic agency (ability to systematically direct AI toward intended outcomes): "The critical prompts helped me refine and focus what the AI was generating" (JA). Most significantly, some participants developed metacognitive agency (understanding of how choices affect AI behavior): "I could have been more specific by saying it was a pitch but still give it in the structure of a story" (IN). This progression from initiation through direction to meta-understanding appears essential for maintaining creative authority while benefiting from AI capabilities.

The second dimension: uncertainty navigation, showed parallel evolution. Activity 1 left participants uncertain about input-output relationships, sometimes experiencing AI suggestions as inscrutable: "Me supplying information definitely influenced the output because it was trying to understand what I wanted it to do" (IN). Activity 2 provided systematic tools for managing uncertainty, enhancing predictability without eliminating valuable surprise: "Task prompts were the most helpful. Verbs like 'expand' and 'reimagine' made it clear what I wanted" (CO). Participants shifted from dependent to instrumental relationships with AI, using it to achieve their objectives rather than depending on it for creative direction.

Importantly, critical prompting appears to be helpful in resolving an apparent "agency paradox", i.e., the concern that structure might limit exploratory creativity. Participants experienced structure as liberating rather than constraining: "The narrative framework provided me with a specific type of user, the environment they were in, and the particular issue they were facing. This made it easier to narrow down solutions and tailor designs" (CO). Well-designed scaffolding appears to enhance agency by providing clear mechanisms for directing AI behavior, enabling rather than restricting creative exploration.

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION

This study examined how prompting frameworks shape creative agency in human-AI collaboration in design fiction activities. Our findings reveal that the combination of story models and critical prompting systematically improves four dimensions of creative collaboration: engagement depth, creative insight generation, empathy development, and output quality. More significantly, we document a developmental

progression in agency, i.e., from basic initiation capabilities through strategic direction to metacognitive awareness, that challenges assumptions about AI either replacing or merely assisting human creativity. This study also speaks to design research debates about design fiction, showing that the credibility of AI assisted fictional artifacts depends on how the collaboration producing them is structured, not only on the artifact itself.

The "credibility gap" finding, where participants distinguished between professional polish and authentic believability, represents an insight for creative practitioners and educators. This suggests that AI-generated sophistication does not automatically translate to conceptual validity, requiring continued human judgment even when technical quality appears high. The progression to metacognitive agency, where students understood how their choices shaped AI behavior, demonstrates that structured scaffolding can enhance rather than constrain creative autonomy.

Several limitations warrant acknowledgment. Our sample size (N=25) and single institutional context limit generalizability. The qualitative focus, while revealing rich process dynamics, prevents statistical validation of patterns. The two-week interval between activities, with critical prompting always following basic prompting rather than being counterbalanced, means observed differences may partly reflect an order or practice effect rather than critical prompting alone.

Future research should validate findings across diverse creative domains, professional contexts, and varied AI tools. Longitudinal studies tracking agency development over extended AI collaboration periods would illuminate whether metacognitive awareness persists and transfers. Cross-cultural investigations could reveal how prompting frameworks interact with different educational traditions and creative practices.

For educators designing AI-integrated curricula, our findings suggest that neither banning AI nor embracing it uncritically serves students well. Instead, structured frameworks that combine domain knowledge (story models) with strategic interaction techniques (critical prompting) can preserve human agency while leveraging AI capabilities. The progression toward metacognitive agency offers a pedagogical goal: not just teaching students to use AI tools, but helping them understand and direct the collaborative process itself.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

None to declare.

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