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Reclaiming Creative Agency: A Virtue Ethics Perspective on Human-AI Collaboration in Motion Comics

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Abstract

The emergence of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) has radically reorganised the production models of digital animation, and AI-driven motion comics have catalysed a transition towards high-efficiency production paradigms in the creative sectors. However, this technological empowerment hides an emerging ethical dilemma on the creative agency. Creators face 'moral deskilling', that is the erosion of narrative and emotional articulation through excessive automation, resulting in professional identity being hollowed out. This study uses a comparative case analysis with a theoretical lens of Virtue Ethics to create a tripartite analytical framework of *Techné*, *Phronesis*, and *Virtue*. It is through this framework that the research methodically dissects the processes of agentic weakening and suggests a path towards reconstruction. The results indicate that by using intent-focused ethical practices, creators ought to repurpose AI as a collaborative prosthetic based on a virtuous agent. This transition allows moving from passive operators to the so-called *Virtuous Creator*, thus ensuring the ethical autonomy in human-AI co-creation and avoiding the danger of colonisation of technology. On the one hand, theoretically, the given paper expands the scope of application of Virtue Ethics to the sphere of digital creativity; on the other hand, it provides practical recommendations regarding industry ethics standards and the recovery of creative agency, creating a sustainable synergy between humanity, art, and technology.

Keywords: Virtue ethics; Creative agency; Human-AI collaboration; Moral deskilling; TEP model; Algorithmic colonisation

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Introduction

The rapid integration of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) has fundamentally restructured digital animation workflows. GenAI motion comics have become a fast-growing phenomenon as a sign of high-efficiency content creation in creative industries. Using its key strengths, including low cost, quick turnaround and mass production, GenAI motion comics have been able to explode on the market. The motion comic channel on the Douyin platform has reportedly reached a daily paid organic traffic of more than ten-million according to reports by TMTPOST Entertainment Unicorn. In just the first half of 2025 alone, more than 3,000 motion comic works were put online across the web- a twelvefold year-on-year increase- which is an official establishment of motion comics as a high-growth path of digital content.

However, this automation dividend precipitates an ethical crisis regarding the displacement of human intent. Creators are increasingly relegated to the role of curators, focusing on IP screening and content auditing at the expense of core design competencies. Fundamental competencies like narrative building, emotional expression and stylistic design are constantly declining. This has eventually resulted in the dilemma of moral deskilling as suggested by Shannon Vallor (2016), where over dependence on technology leads to the disintegration of human practical wisdom and ethical judgment, leaving creative agency and professional identity in a condition of hollowing out (Vallor, 2016).

Current studies of AI creative practices are mainly dedicated to the legal conflicts related to copyright ownership (Shumakova et al., 2023) and optimisation directions in the sphere of industrial efficiency (Abootorabi et al., 2025), but do not pay attention to the ethical question of how to rebuild professional identity of creators. According to Zeeshan Jawed Shah (2025) in the concept of "Sustainaissance" (Sustainable Prosperity), the sustainable development of digital creativity is determined by both technological innovations, as well as an ethical balance between humans and machines. In the case of GenAI motion comics, the primary contradiction is no longer how to use AI for efficiency, but rather how to avoid the technological colonisation of humans during co-creation. This problem is a matter that needs a theoretical answer and practical advice based on the virtue ethics point of view.

Research Question

Against this temporal and industrial backdrop, this paper proposes three research questions:

1. Within the wave of AI technology, what specific forms does the risk of "moral deskilling" take for creators of GenAI motion comics, and what is its internal formation mechanism?

2. What are the ways in which creators can recreate their professional identities to avoid identity hollowing and find a balance between technological empowerment and ethical autonomy?
3. Which moral course of action will lead creators to be not passive but active decision-makers in terms of algorithms, and transform them into Virtuous Creators having a high level of agency?

Research Objective

This study aims to:

1. Specify the particular forms and risks of moral deskilling in the development of GenAI comics, and offer a theoretical foundation to prevent identity hollowing;
2. Investigate the connotations and reconstruction routes of professional identity of creators within the human-AI co-creation model, enriching the theoretical system of creative agency in the digital age;
3. Propose actionable ethical practice guidelines for identity reconstruction to guide a benign interaction between creators and AI.

The theoretical value of the study is in the profound interweaving of Aristotelian virtue ethics and the area of AI animation development, creating a framework of agency analysis *Techne - Phronesis - Virtue*, as well as filling the research gap concerning philosophical depth. Practically speaking, the results of the research and practice recommendations will assist creators to understand their ethical duties in co-creation, offer decision-making guidelines to industry associations and platforms to establish ethical standards, and create an ethical basis on the Sustainaissance of digital creativity.

Literature Review

This part seeks to investigate three pressing concerns about generative artificial intelligence (GAI) in the animation development sphere. This paper discusses the structural change of paradigms of animation production under the influence of technology, crisis of loss of creative agency in human-AI interaction, and the guidance offered by virtue ethics to overcome the ethical dilemmas that animators face. Through critical incorporation of the literature available, this review will clarify the role and weaknesses of the existing research, thus setting up the theoretical requirement and innovative capacity of the study of reconstruction of creative agency of creators of GenAI comics through the lens of virtue ethics.

Evolution of Generative AI and Animation Production Paradigms

The recent explosion of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) has radically transformed the pipeline of digital animation production in the last few years. The initial studies were mainly dedicated to the use of AI in supporting activities, including character referencing, in-betweening, colouring and audio sampling. However, with the advent of high-fidelity models (e.g., Sora, Dreamina, Kling), the paradigm has shifted from tool-assisted production to end-to-end generation. According to Abootorabi et al. (2025), this paradigm change has brought down the marginal cost of content creation to zero. Being an effective and scalable form of content, the production cycle of GenAI comics is shortened by more than 80 percent relative to conventional pipelines (Abootorabi et al., 2025). However, Li (2024) believes that such efficiency dividend will result in industrial mediocrity in creative logic; creators are inclined to use more standardised visual templates which can be easily processed by AI, hence setting off the danger of aesthetic homogenisation (Li, 2024).

Theoretical Contradictions of Distributed Agency

As algorithms become more than just brushes and transform into decision-makers, the agency of the creator is put in a position that has never been faced before. According to Cetini and She (2022), when it comes to AI collaboration, the human role is being transformed out of a shaper into a curator (Cetini & She, 2022). This distributed agency makes the authorship and belonging sense increasingly ambiguous. Zylinska (2020) notes that artistic creation must be an embodied and intentional human action, which AI-based automated generation cuts off the emotional feedback loop between the artist and the work (Zylinska, 2020). Here, professional animators do not only feel the threat of being replaced but also experience a deeper creative alienation, loss of micro-control over each pixel and frame of movement, which results in the hollowing-out of their professional identity.

The Revival of Virtue Ethics in Technological Ethics

When confronted with the problem of algorithmic alienation, conventional ethical analysis that focuses on consequences, like copyright protection and data leakage, has been found to be inadequate in explaining the psychological crisis of creators, leading back to virtue ethics. According to Vallor (2016) and recent studies of virtue ethics (e.g., Danaher, 2022), it is highlighted that technology should be used to serve human virtuous practice but not reduce the room of developing practical wisdom (phronesis) (Dubber et al., 2020; Vallor, 2016). According to Mazzone and Elgammal (2019), true creative agency is based on the moral use of technology and skill development under the guidance of intention (Mazzone & Elgammal, 2019). Danaher (2022) also suggests that the design of technology must focus on facilitating human virtue instead of dissolving possibilities of its exercise (Dubber et al., 2020). Nevertheless, current studies are mostly macro-theoretical in nature and have not yet ventured into the

particular context of animation industry. Current frameworks lack empirical models that reposition AI as a collaborative prosthetic for identity reconstruction.

To conclude, the current literature is dedicated to investigating the opportunities of GenAI in terms of improving creative efficiency (Xiao and Wu, 2025) and the ownership of AI art (Shumakova et al., 2023). Nonetheless, there is still no systematic comparison and ethical advice on how creators in highly automated settings undergo moral deskilling and how they can regain their agency by raising the percentage of creative decision-making. The present paper will be devoted to addressing such gaps both theoretically and practically.

Theoretical Framework

The philosophical basis of this study is based on Aristotelian virtue ethics (Aristotle, 2011) with the incorporation of Shannon Vallor (2016) theory of moral deskilling to develop a tripartite analytical framework of *Techne - Phronesis - Virtue*. This model gives the academic backing that is required in examining the crisis of agency and how it can be reconstructed in the development of GenAI comics.

According to Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, virtue (*arete*) is not an inherent gift but a character trait that has been developed by habituated practice. The critical ability that links virtue and action is called "practical wisdom" (*phronesis*), which allows the subject to make ethical decisions in particular situations. Moreover, the fulfillment of happiness (*eudaimonia*) is based on the constant exercise of virtuous actions (Aristotle, 2011). This paper transfers this theory into creative sphere with the emphasis on creative agency, which can be described as the ethical judgment and intent-oriented behavioural consciousness developed by the creator through the development of his/her craft.

According to Vallor (2016), modern technology does not make moral deskilling by forbidding people to exercise virtue but it replaces human judgment. Technology that replaces critical stages of human practice deprives people of the chances to develop virtues like care, prudence and courage (Vallor, 2016). The study also argues that in the case of producing GenAI comics, the algorithmic appropriation of fundamental processes such as narrative development, expression of emotions, cinematic language, and major movements not only reduces technical expertise but also disrupts the ethical feedback loop of practice-reflection-virtue development, leaving creators in a state of hollowing out of agency. It is this theory which exactly shows the essence of the conflict between efficiency logic and ethical agency.

Combining the above theories, this paper suggests a three-dimensional analysis framework: "*Techne - Phronesis - Virtue*." The term *Techne* is used to describe the mastery of professional skills

by the creator including narration and visual language. Phronesis denotes the ability to recognise ethical situations, consider values, and take decisions that are motivated by purpose towards ethics in human-AI cooperation. The qualities of responsibility, creativity and humanistic care internalised by constant practice make up what is called virtue.

This model makes the concept of moral deskillling operational in terms of observable dimensions and offers a focused direction to identity reconstruction of Virtuous Creators, which effectively closes the theoretical gap between technological ethics and creative practice.

Methodology

The paper will follow a comparative case analysis approach in the context of qualitative research paradigm, which is intended to investigate the shift of creative agency with the intervention of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI). Case studies enable a deep study of complicated phenomena in particular contexts and demonstrate the inherent connection between technological development and human behaviour (Creswell, 2017). This study uses virtue ethics as an assessment instrument to break down polarised creative paradigms to establish the tangible limits of moral deskillling and provide realistic directions towards identity reconstruction.

In order to make the research valid, two representative works with large differences in technological pipelines and creative logic were selected for comparative analysis. The "maximum variation" case selection strategy is used to find out the key variables of agency loss and retention by means of extreme contrast.

I Shocked the Gods Beneath the Slaying Stage (hereinafter referred to as *I Shocked the Gods*), as a phenomenal work in the area of GenAI comics, is the best example of automated efficiency in the present-day creative sector (shown in Figure 1.). The project depends on massive prompt generation and automated algorithmic processes, and the human creator has been reduced to instruction input and initial screening. It is a common negative source of learning about the dangers of moral deskillling and identity hollowing.



Figure 1. Case Analysis A: 'I Shocked the Gods' representing high 'Algorithmic Tolerance' and Low Techne Participation.

Dear Upstairs Neighbors is a human-AI collaboration paradigm of an artist-will-led (see Figure 2.). The designers have high ratio of manual intervention in character design, dynamic exaggeration, timing and emotional rendering limiting AI to secondary levels like visual style, mid-frame, colouring and post-rendering. This case gives a good example to the study in terms of agency reconstruction.



Figure 2. Case Analysis B: '*Dear Upstairs Neighbors*' representing Intent-Anchored creation and High Evaluative Judgment.

The research goes beyond the visual description as it builds the TEP analytical framework to combine theory and practice. According to the virtue ethics of Aristotle and Shannon Vallor, there are three dimensions in the framework: 1. *Techne Participation (T)*: Quantifies the ratio of embodied, non-automated craftsmanship within the production pipeline; 2. *Evaluative Judgment (E)*: Examines how often creators participate in aesthetic reflection, alteration or even vetoing AI-generated outputs which is equivalent to whether the creator has practiced practical wisdom; 3. *Presence of Agency (P)*: Explores whether the artistic soul of the final product comes out of the intent of the creator towards morality or the stochastic probability of the algorithm. The dynamic relationship and classification of these dimensions can be seen in the Technological-Ethical-Professional (TEP) Model (see Figure 3.).

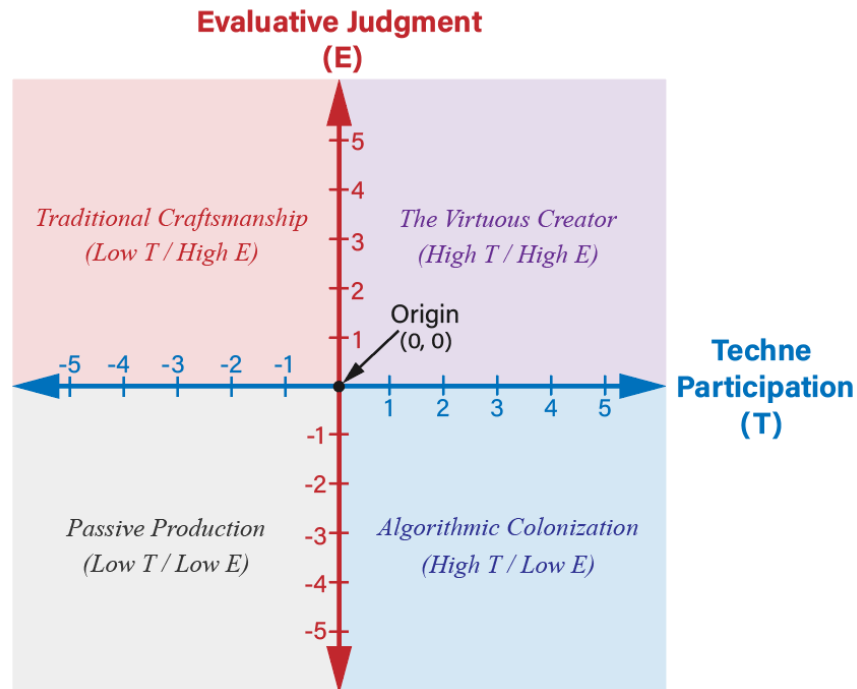


Figure 3. The Technological-Ethical-Professional (TEP) Model

The data of the research were mainly obtained through three channels. To begin with, a profound deconstruction of the narratives and pipelines of the case works was carried out to examine the allocation of power behind the visuals. Second, technical paths and creative revelations that the lead creative teams shared on open platforms were gathered and grouped in order to gain first-hand information about the self-identity of the creators. Lastly, an ethical investigation was carried out under the virtue ethics model to assess the impact of ethical creative behaviour.

Case Study

This part of the paper will bring the research interest in line with the TEP model to conduct a comparative analysis between the highly automated *GenAI comics I Shocked the Gods* and the artist-driven animation short *Dear Upstairs Neighbors*, which will be used to expose the rationale of gain and loss of creative agency under various human-AI collaboration paradigms.

In the case of Techne Participation (T), that is, the transition from embodied drawing to prompt retrieval. The nature of "Techne" is in the relationship between the creator and the medium. Traditional drawing of modelling, lighting, composition, camera movement, and action is replaced by "prompt retrieval" based on natural language in the production pipeline of *I Shocked the Gods*. The example of full outsourcing of Techne is provided by *I Shocked the Gods*. The behaviour of the creator is mainly expressed in typing text into generative AI models. The whole process is AI-driven, including script to visuals and then voiceovers. In this model, creators do not have physical control over lines, brushstrokes,

light, dynamics, and other expressions of characters. Techne is transformed from the mastery of physical craft into the management of stochastic filtering. The absence of any form of physical resistance in the production process makes the creator lose sensitivity towards the logic behind visual generation.

On the other hand, *Dear Upstairs Neighbors* is an example of embodied anchoring of Techne. The creative team of this work was different because they grounded their project in a real-life scenario—loud sound of a neighbor upstairs walking on high heels that disturbed the sleep of the creator and then inspired him. There they made character modelling, expression, pose settings and did storyboards, scenes, and dynamic sketches drawing. In effect, all pre-production material was controlled by humans. The use of AI technology was limited to visual style optimisation, middle frame, colouring and post-production special effects. During keyframe dynamics processing, the deconstruction of the wallpaper-like visuals was maintained by the creators. Such preservation of the T-dimension makes sure of the material domination of the images by the creator over the texture.

As to Evaluative Judgment (E) - the gambit between stochastic acceptance and aesthetic veto power. "Practical wisdom" is realised in creation as the scrutiny and revision of the creator when confronted with generated results. In *I Shocked the Gods*, the creator's role is reduced to a shallow audit of algorithmically generated outputs. In this work, the creators show an extremely high "algorithmic tolerance." When AI-generated actions or backgrounds contain logical errors, for example, perspective distortions or inconsistent lighting, the creators often give up their "veto power" to maintain high-efficiency output. The acceptance of visual logical errors to maintain speed validates the 'moral deskilling' phenomenon, where aesthetic responsibility is abdicated for efficiency.

Dear Upstairs Neighbors, on the other hand, is a profound interference in creative decision-making. The creators consider AI as a very disruptive enemy and often practice evaluative judgment when working together. Upon encountering visual artifacts produced by AI, the artists make corrections using such techniques as changing hand-drawn sketches and fine-tuning algorithmic weights. All revisions are an act of practical wisdom which makes sure that all aspects of the imagery correspond to the internal creative intention.

As to the issue of Presence of Agency (P) - the clash between algorithmic fingerprints and ethical intentions. Presence of agency is the origin of artistic authenticity, which defines a work as a "collage of data" or an "expression of the soul". *I Shocked the Gods* shows identity hollowing and algorithmic colonisation. This work exhibits significant model traces. Furthermore, character expressions and movements exhibit a high level of homogenisation. The emotional fingerprints of the

creator are absorbed into huge pre-trained datasets. At this stage, the identity of the creator is more akin to that of a pipeline quality inspector, and their agency is colonised by algorithmic logic.

Dear Upstairs Neighbors shows agency reconstruction and deliberate anchoring. Although it is an AI - experimental animation short made through human-AI cooperation, the audience can hardly find any traces of the algorithm. In addition, the audience can clearly see the creator's precise control over "anxiety" and "loneliness" themes. Here, AI is no longer the "brain" of creation but has been reconstituted into a "collaborative prosthetic". It stretches the limits of the creator's visual expression without undermining their core identity as a virtuous creator.

Discussion

According to the comparative analysis of *I Shocked the Gods* and *Dear Upstairs Neighbors*, this paper indicates the rationale behind agency gain and loss after the generative AI has been introduced into animation making. The next discussion goes deeper into the crisis and reconstruction of professional identity of the creator.

The comparison of these two cases shows that the dissolution of agency is usually initiated by the extreme production efficiency of the creator, and its restoration is conditioned by the compliance with the creative intent. The example shown in *I Shocked the Gods* model has creators taking a utilitarian reasoning where AI is seen as an automated factory of production. This paradigm waters down ethical responsibility. In the case of visual logical errors or aesthetic mediocrity, artists are inclined to blame it on algorithmic constraints instead of their own professional incompetence.

On the other hand, in the view of virtue ethics, creative agency is not a mere exercise of power but taking responsibility. The initial stage in reconstructing agency is the determination of the non-negotiability of ethical responsibility. No matter how much AI is involved, the creator should be repositioned as the only person who can bear the final ethical and artistic value of the work. This means that the essence of the identity of the creator should change to become not a task-oriented laborer but a virtuous subject protecting aesthetic integrity.

When it comes to how animators resist "moral deskilling," the internal motivation and will of the creator is important. This study uses the author's doctoral research results, which are from a quantitative empirical study about the effects of ethical creative behaviour among core Chinese animation creators. The investigation combines the multi - dimensional views of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), virtue ethics, and consequentialism to systematically measure the impacts of ethical

attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavioural control, and intention towards ethics on the effects of ethical creative behaviour.

Empirical data (Estimate = 0.678) confirms that 'Intention towards Ethics' is the primary determinant of humanistic value in human-AI co-creation. This conclusion statistically proves that in the complex landscape of human-AI collaboration, the degree of the creator's inner consciousness toward "adhering to artistic authenticity" and "fulfilling ethical responsibility" is the most critical variable determining the artistic quality and humanistic value of the final work.

This observation is another confirmation of the key position of “*phronesis*” in the AI era, as viewed through the prism of virtue ethics. The intent as a motivator of virtue implies that when animation directors or screenwriters have a high level of consciousness based on intent at the start of the creative process, they are more likely to view AI as an auxiliary tool under their control than a substitute decision-maker. This inner purpose will successfully trigger evaluative judgment in the creative process and preserve high aesthetic standards and moral limits in case of stochastic outputs of algorithms.

Empirical evidence also shows that despite the technological environment (perceived behavioural control) and industrial trends (subjective norms) being biased towards a fully automated output, creators who have a strong intention towards ethics can still introduce "friction" into the AI workflow by self-regulating through iterative revisions and ethical deliberation. This action will make sure that *Techne* is not completely eliminated by over automation.

The study also indicates that there is a positive correlation between intent and behavioural effects. This implies that the hollowing out of GenAI comics does not necessarily result as a side effect of the technology, but it is an outcome of the watering down of the ethical purpose of the creator. In the absence of ethical intent, the author becomes a servant to the algorithm and the work will eventually become mediocre homogenisation. But when the ethical intent is strong, like in *Dear Upstairs Neighbors*, artists can convert AI-produced visual contents into very realistic artistic works by means of the anchoring effect of their intentions.

The reconstruction path should not be based on the denial of AI, but rather on the proactive introduction of friction to fight deskilling. An example is that this can be done by introducing forced manual aesthetic intervention points in the process or back to hand-drawn sketches and modelling in major action sequences. This identity reconstitution demands creators to keep a prudent sense of distance to the algorithm psychologically, making AI an all-automatic production engine into a controlled mediatory tool.

Conclusion and Recommendations

According to the virtue ethics point of view and a comparative case study on various production paradigms in AI animation, this paper systematically investigates the processes of gain and loss concerning creative agency when subjected to generative AI. Findings suggest that unmediated algorithmic dependence facilitates moral deskilling, placing professional identity in a state of crisis. Nevertheless, empirical evidence proves that high intention towards ethics can successfully overcome technological alienation, giving a psychological and ethical foundation to the reconstruction of identity.

In reaction to these results, this paper suggests a list of ethical practice guidelines based on the "reclamation of agency," with the goal of guiding creators in their shift from being "algorithmic decision-makers" to virtuous creators.

1. **Intent Anchoring:** The creators need to set a specific narrative purpose and aesthetic essence prior to working with AI tools. This includes the rejection of prompt blind-testing, demanding human-driven initial storyboards and key action settings, and making sure that AI is only used as a collaborative prosthetic at the implementation level.
2. **Aesthetic Veto Power:** There should be mandatory ethical-aesthetic intervention nodes in the workflow. In situations where the results generated by AI have logical mistakes or aesthetic mediocrity, creators need to use their veto power and manually correct it or retrain models. This guarantees the uninterrupted functioning of phronesis.
3. **Ethical Responsibility Loop:** There should be a professional ethical agreement of the principle of 'leadership entails responsibility'. The creators must improve their aesthetic abilities and professional literacy; they ought not to blame algorithms but instead set their professional dignity as virtuous subjects by assuming complete responsibility over the final audiovisual effects of the work.

This study frames identity reconstruction as a prerequisite for 'Sustainaissance', where AI functions as a collaborative prosthetic under virtuous human agency. The essence of such a reconstruction of identity consists in reducing AI as an all-automatic production factory into a collaborative prosthetic under the influence of a virtuous agent. This self-regulation of identity and power reclamation is the moral condition of attaining sustainable and synergistic development of humanity, art, and technology in the digital creative world. Once humans lose their intent-orientation in co-creation, it is no longer a true co-creation but rather significant technological colonisation. Animation creators can only protect their professional foundations against the algorithmic wave and start a human-centred digital art renaissance by practicing virtue.

The scope of this research is restricted by the sample size and the existing level of generative AI development. The future studies can also examine the variations in the practical implementation of virtue concepts in different sub-sectors, including AR, VR, and gaming, and witness the significant influence of the virtuous creator model on the industrial ecology based on long-term longitudinal studies.

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