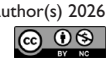
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The exhaustion of user experience: *The business of spam, slop, and other infrastructural bugs*

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Abstract

While referring to real-world experiences of digital culture, this article begins by adopting speculative fiction to examine three contrasting imaginary users of AI-generated 'slop': Ananya, a UX designer in Bengaluru facing layoff; Prakash, a Jakarta-based content creator monetizing viral absurdist content; and *YOU*, the exhausted user. Consistent with earlier analyses of spam, the article argues that AI slop is not an external failure, but a constitutive accident generated at the moment of innovation. Like most technological inventions, AI carries its own potential crash. Critiquing a prevalent 'windshield or bug' metaphor, the author contends that slop is not an anomalous bad bug, but an expression of platforms optimized for scale within inequitable economies. Ultimately, user exhaustion is not an outdated skills issue. It is a feature of infrastructures designed to extract value from increasingly *enshittified* user experiences at ever-greater scales.

Keywords

AI slop, accidents, spam, platform, windshield/bug, infrastructure, enshittification, precarity, UX (user experience), exhaustion, optimization, extraction

Introduction

While situated in real-world experience, this article adopts a speculative fiction inflection to examine three contrasting imaginary users in the age of AI-generated 'slop'. The

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first user is Ananya, a designer at an ambitious UX company in Bengaluru. She is holding a layoff notice. After 8 years' experience, her role is 'being consolidated'. The company is 'pivoting towards AI-driven personalization'. Her notice arrived by email, sent by someone who also probably fears their own consolidation. The message itself, she suspects, is most likely generated by AI.

Ananya is clearly upset. She is a disciple of the UX design gurus, Jakob Nielsen and Don Norman. She followed Nielsen's influential heuristics and worshipped Norman's emotional design thesis. Her mission (described on LinkedIn) is to reduce the cognitive friction of the user experience; to make room for more visceral encounters; to make interfaces feel almost invisible. Her designs are aligned with how users behave, think, and feel. Mental energy is not therefore exhausted trying to decode the system.

Ananya is an apostolic follower, delivering internal staff development sessions enthusiastically explaining the neuroscience of experience to fellow designers. When a website clearly matches real-world conventions, she tells her colleagues, the user's brain can creatively engage with the task rather than the tool. Good UX design removes the friction of cognitive dissonance, of getting lost, of trying to remember where things are. Moreover, good UX provides a neurological comfort zone. It smooths the path between the brain's intention and the user's interaction so that the interface itself fades into the background.

It is Ananya who now feels exhausted, almost invisible.

The second character is Prakash, a do-it-yourself digital content creator based in Jakarta. Since early 2024, he has specialized in AI-generated content. He is touchy about his new approach to work and often irked by those who all-too-easily dismiss his efforts as slop. Although he produces this work to generate engagement metrics and earn money, he actually likes its synthetic realism. He does not judge its uncanny computer aesthetic as the opposite of good design. Yes, a quick surface glance reveals a peculiar phantastic imitation of real life. This is a statistical echo of reality; an image infinitely derived from an endlessly farmed stream of images of organic and inorganic matter. But this is what drives Prakash's attraction to AI; the remix's propensity to misalign its unlimited visual references to reality: Jesus with prawns, cats eating spaghetti, sushi rolls with live chickens inside, Roman soldiers eating at McDonald's, and newborn babies as university professors. It is these mismatches that make him grin like a Cheshire Cat.

And who cares about good design, anyhow, Prakash declares. He can earn relatively good money for churning this stuff out. His cat eating spaghetti has amassed nearly 12 million views in just a few weeks. He has produced 47 similar videos in the last hour using free tools. Each will earn him about three cents per thousand views. At this rate, he makes more money from AI slop than the gig economy in Jakarta, which can often pay a lot less than the $2.00 per hour minimum wage.

The windshield or the bug

Ananya is feeling depressed. Not only is she losing her dream job in UX, but she has also just read a troubling Substack article offering the professional UXer a stark career choice (Nielsen, 2023). In the age of GenAI, you are either 'the windshield or you're the bug', her guru Nielsen announces, channelling the ghost of his former guru, Scott McNealy:

> Visualize a high-speed car confronting an insect on the road, a metaphor for technology-induced changes. Be the windshield, mastering AI and its applications. If not, prepare to be the bug – outdated and squashed by AI-driven competitors (Nielsen, 2023).

By summoning McNealy's automotive metaphor, Nielsen remains consistent with the UX preference for frictionless encounters with external obstacles. The UXer who survives is like a professionally polished windshield, functioning without resistance to turbulence. Bugs are at variance with these prevailing yet inevitable technological trends. Bugs are behind the times, off-base, out of step. Being a bug is the price you pay for not keeping pace with market dynamics! Caught in the wake of technological progress, it is all too easy to become an irritating anomaly. You are judged as an interruption, an obsolete thing that gets in the way. The incongruous bug is the thing that ultimately should not be there (Figure 1).

Clutching her notice, Ananya feels like a tiny bug. Squashed!

Prakash's embrace of AI slop enables him to survive in the turbulent slipstream enveloping the windshield. There he manages to avoid being splattered. In fact, Prakash does not see himself as a bug at all. He gets his sustenance from the velocity of disruptive technology rather than being threatened by its pace. He sees himself as a fearless innovator creating a significant distinction between him and Ananya. The UXer's training taught her to erase oncoming design tensions, making way for flow states of seamless interaction. Through his penchant for the slight visual stutters in morphing AI's anatomical impossibilities, Prakash, by contrast, seizes the value of the debris of attention. Through the repetitive sequences of human morphing into animal or object (and vice versa), he realizes how to monetize slop using the glitchiest aesthetic possible. These tawdry distractions are defective pain points that UXers would normatively try to erase. But for Prakash, these algorithmically generated sub-nutrients enable him to tune into the exhausted experience of infinite vacuous novelty and retain users' already-preoccupied attention. He doesn't care if his work rots your brain! By producing this content at scale (47 variations of the cat eating spaghetti rendered before teatime), he manages to convert the redundancy logic of GenAI into a survival strategy. Certainly, in contrast to UX's cultivation of ersatz user joy, the production of AI slop produces something more disposably useful.

Slop forms a crucial buffer between Prakash and the precarity of the platform economy. If he is to be considered a bug, then he prefers to be part of a bug-swarm; too numerous, too adaptive to be individually splattered over the windshield. Prakash avoids the squash by becoming many, collectively winged, and strangely indispensable to the very platform economy that now renders Ananya's role consolidated.

From the rear-view mirror, inside the car, it now seems that rewards for pointless distraction supersede sleekly designed experiences.

Disrupting the narrative

The bug-like characters of our first two imaginary users, Ananya and Prakash, arise from a familiar story about disruptive technology writ large, and GenAI in particular. These stories are often framed in the dramatic rhetoric of innovation, which insists the mutual collisions are inevitable and therefore neutral. However, this does not mean that the



Figure 1. The windshield or the bug.

available safety features are distributed fairly. Ananya and Prakash will never be the seatbelted occupants riding inside the car, protected by the windshield, or indeed the protective layers of capital reserves, elite social networks, institutional prestige, or with the time and resources to simply 'reskill' and move on. Ananya will not be thrown forward into a cushioned airbag, absorbing the shock of her layoff. Her income and dignity will crash. Similarly, although Prakash may stealthily avoid direct impact, the damage will predictably be concentrated along existing fault lines. Those already closest to precarity most gratefully adapt to the disturbance in ways that resemble a fragile pirate-like existence. In this alternative version of disruption, technology is not simply a force of change; it becomes a mechanism that converts structural inequality into individual adversity.

Nielsen's choice is Hobson's choice. Ananya and Prakash will never be the windshield. They just need to decide on what kind of bug they want to be.

The most disturbing narrative emerging from Ananya and Prakash's experience is the lack of agency they have on what Bill Gates (1995) once called *The Road Ahead*. Even if they could hide behind the windshield, inside the disruptive machine that both characters serve, Ananya and Prakash can never meaningfully steer its course. They cannot avoid the collision! To better grasp their perilous attachment to this metaphorical car accident, we need to bring in Paul Virilio's (2007) eminent aphorism that every modern technological invention carries within it a potential accident. For Virilio, as Douglas Kellner (1999: 108) notes,

> . . . every technological system generates its specific form of accident: with the invention of the ship, you get the shipwreck; the plane brings plane crashes; the automobile, car accidents and so on.

Seen through Virilio's accident, a bug hitting the windshield is not simply an external impact. The accident is a phantom of the infrastructure, generated at the very moment of the innovation itself. The proliferation of GenAI does more than merely introduce new efficiencies and the mass displacements of labour. The infrastructural operations of the car were supposed to be designed to withstand the splattering of bugs. However, as bugs, Ananya and Prakash remain dangerously inseparable from the constitutive accidents the machine generates as a condition of its own functionality. They are not simply tragic bugs caught in the headlights of progress; they are the original accident's substrate.

With the invention of AI, we get new forms of accident

Crucially, while bugs are often mistaken by those fortunate enough to hide behind their windshields as bad objects, system anomalies, or grievous threats to their normative sense of economic security, accidents are never experienced evenly. Virilio's interest in temporality is relevant here too. Speed intensifies the scale of the catastrophe while also amplifying the consequences for those who bear the greatest burden. The velocity of the 'AI accident' is therefore not just a glitch or system error. It is a temporal event in which technological vulnerability is rapidly expanded, unequally redistributed, and often suffered in unexpected ways. *Time is the accident of accidents* (Redhead, 2006: 15).

The spam–slop continuum

Back in 2009, we argued that spam, viruses, worms, and other digital bugs were not system anomalies (Parikka and Sampson, 2009). These early Internet infestations were not inconsistent with network culture. They were not failures of the system, but a logical machinic expression of Virilio's phantom accidents. The very protocols that enable communication to move rapidly and benignly through a network also enabled the seemingly perverse and sometimes malevolent contagion of bugs. In many comparable ways to the current wave of AI slop, it was the same unregulated network *openness* that allowed bugs of all kinds to persist.

Bugs as infrastructure

> Not all AI content is spam, but right now, all spam is AI content. (Espada, 2025)

Network culture does not produce spam as a side effect. Spam is infrastructural: a constitutive accident. Slop is spam manifest in the age of AI. The protocols that enable global communication simultaneously allow global contamination. The same TCP/IP packets that carry photographs from your social media also carry these cat-spaghetti abominations. The infrastructure finds it difficult to distinguish, to filter. Like fact-checkers, distinguishing is someone else's job anyhow, and that someone just got laid off.

Low-cost unsolicited bulk. Volume substitutes for value

Like spam, Prakash's bad bugs are able to flood the system at near-zero cost. As digital marketing professional, Luis Espada (2025), points out, platforms have 'created lucrative opportunities for content creators to exploit generative AI tools that the platforms themselves are also deploying'. TikTok's Creator Fund, Meta's Creator Bonus Program, YouTube's Partner Program and X's revenue sharing operates on comparable principles: engagement equals low rates of payment per view, regardless of what generates that engagement. At these low rates, quality is not just difficult to maintain: it is economically irrational. Why spend days crafting one meaningful video when Prakash can generate 47 cat-spaghetti atrocities in a morning?

Bugs teaching bugs

Like 1980s virus writers, there is an emerging AI Slop handbook culture. Creators are selling tutorials for $17.99 on 'secrets to crafting viral cat AI videos that capture hearts on TikTok' (Espada, 2025). The infestation is *reproducing* itself. AI content instructors also use the spam-like mass generation of text, but now refined as automated AI text prompts generating unlimited ad variations automatically.

GenAI is not entirely spam-like. There are differences in the business model. Espada (2025) points to several new skills to learn.

Platform arbitrage

It is important to know how to translate viral videos from Douyin (TikTok's Chinese equivalent) and repost them as 'original' content on Western platforms. As one slop creator explains, 'China's short video market is nearing saturation, which means you need to seek data traffic [viewers] on overseas platforms' (Espada, 2025).

Bugs eating bugs

Previously, even automated spam required at least minimal human effort: typing, copying, pasting. Now the accident propagates at machine speed. As Espada (2025) notes, Meta pays for this content while announcing the development of 'infinite creative' with

Expressive Media Universe (EMU). Google similarly pays for slop while building *AI Max* for search campaigns and integrating ads directly into *AI Overviews*. AI slop will eventually remove the human barrier from spam production. Even Prakash knows that the production line will inevitably run itself without him.

This is not systematic hypocrisy. The infrastructure already has two faces.

Extraction: Pay humans pennies to generate the engagement metrics that justify valuations.

Replacement: Build AI tools to eventually eliminate humans entirely.

The bug is not on the windshield. The bug is the business model.

No metaphor

Nielsen's metaphor depends on several assumptions. It assumes there is a clean machine encountering external dirty threats, implying a clear separation between what is pure and what contaminates. It assumes a linear trajectory. Nielsen's car is actually going somewhere, suggesting purpose, direction, and progress. It depends on clear categories: driver versus obstacle, inside versus outside, creating stable boundaries between control and obstruction. And it assumes agency: the ability to choose what to be within the windshield or bug metaphor.

The slop economy dismantles each assumption.

There is no clean machine

The system was always infested, always dirty. If we need a better metaphor, then slop is the exhaust pipe connected to the air intake recirculating throughout the car's interior.

No linear trajectory

The car on this *Road Ahead* loops back on itself, consuming its own fuel. Platforms pay for slop while developing tools to replace slop creators. They fund the very car crashes they will later claim to protect users from.

No clear categories

Who is the bug? The content creator? The UX designer? The platform? The User viewing? These categories fold into each other.

No agency

The UX designer facing layoffs did not choose to be a bug. They were made redundant by the same logic that makes three-cents-per-thousand-views viable. Mastering AI will not, as Nielsen seems to claim, save you from your own accident.

YOU!

The third character is the User. It is the *YOU*. Not the 'I'. As Wendy Chun, Sue Grand and Patricia Clough (cited in Sampson, 2020: 21) have similarly argued, the personal 'I' has long collapsed into the YOU. YOU scroll. YOU put the phone down; YOU pick it up again. YOU scroll again. YOU close the laptop; YOU open it up again. YOU look away. YOU look back. YOU scroll. YOU pause. YOU scroll again. The screens that glow and lure . . . they all belong to YOU. And during this time, the feed has already regenerated, again and again: the same cat eating spaghetti, the same article telling YOU to either master AI or be squashed by it. YOU have already seen all of this before. YOU have seen it 47 times today already. The once smoothed frictionless slurry, sliding past your attention without ever making a cognitive connection, is now eternally optimized for SEO metrics. The platforms call this engagement. Dwell-time. YOU call it exhaustion: the slow, grinding fatigue of consuming anaesthetizing AI-generated content.

YOU are not prompting the interface. The interface prompts YOU. It extracts the milliseconds between your scrolls, packaging your exhaustion as engagement, selling it back to the platforms who fund the slop that exhausted you in the first place. YOU are tired of deciding what kind of bug to be. YOU are tired of being told that exhaustion is your skills issue, that if you just need to master the new tools, and turn your burnout into a side hustle – a pirate's revenue stream. YOU put the phone away again. YOU pick it up again. YOU put it down. YOU hover. The screen waits. Your thumb hovers. And somewhere, in the infrastructure of rot, slop, and shit, your hesitation is logged as valuable data and serves YOU another cat eating spaghetti. Doctorow's (2025) enshittification is now total.

This is the user experience. This is the *struggle for experience*.

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His new book, *Birth, School, Work, Death: UX and the Struggle Against Lifecycle Optimization* (original working title 'The Struggle for User Experience'), University of Minnesota Press, extends his analysis of digital influence by examining how the logic of user experience design and marketing increasingly structures institutions and everyday practices across the life course.