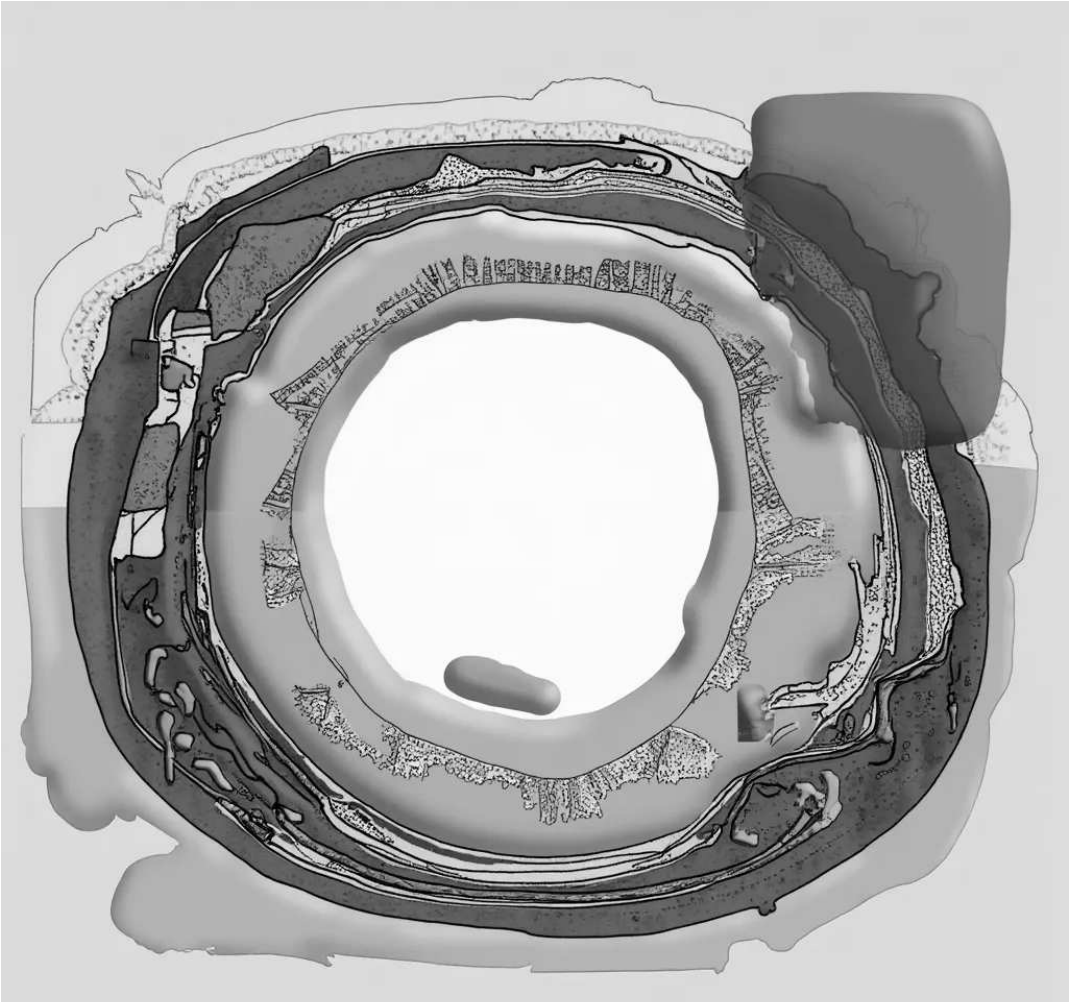
Protocol Fiction Aesthetics

Issue #71: macro, neumorphic, arcane, cryptic, fractal

JAMES LANGDON AND PROTOCOLIZED
NOV 14, 2025

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In this issue: *We debut a new art direction for* ***Protocolized*** *and open access to tw image generation models developed for the magazine by artist* ***Darius Ou of hyperpress*** *and Protocolized editor* ***James Langdon****, in collaboration with* ***TITLES*** *new,* ***purely visual bounty*** *in the Summer of Protocols Discord introduces the new to our community of contributors.*



The first 70 issues of *Protocolized* were illustrated with art generated by Midjourney referencing a moodboard stocked with visuals from the 20th century's "golden era" science fiction publishing.

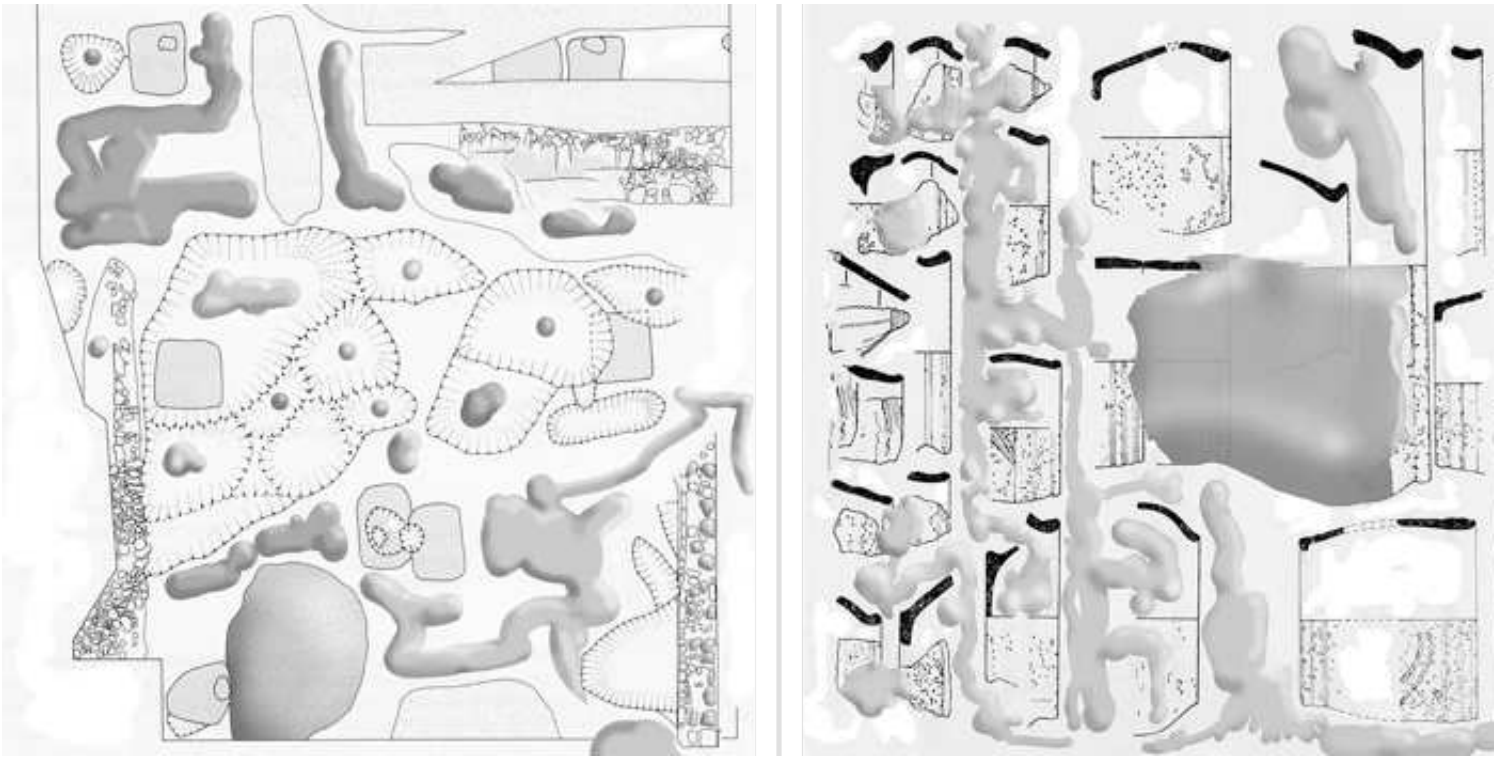
In particular, one magazine from that time – *Astounding Stories of Super-Science* – has been a formative influence on our project to meme the genre of protocol fiction into existence. *Astounding* set itself apart by moving away from the garish, action-oriented tradition of pulp illustration – heroes punching aliens in brightly-colored, sensationalized imagery – and toward a more subtly conceptual approach, grounde in believable technological futures. Editor John W. Campbell considered art to be ar integral part of the magazine's proposition to readers. He took inspiration from the suggestive potential of images, sometimes even inviting authors to write stories in response to paintings that he had commissioned. Campbell was fully aware of the concerted world-building power of tightly integrated text and image.

Through its initial art direction, *Protocolized* has paid explicit, admiring tribute to *Astounding*, positioning itself in a familiar tradition of speculative fiction. We have made this style our own by consistently de-emphasizing human protagonists in the composition of illustrations. We instead picture less likely protagonists, such as autonomous agents, cybernetic systems, and novel infrastructures – bringing the background into the foreground.

Astounding aesthetics now carry nostalgic connotations which were never part of tl original cultural appeal. As compelling as they still are, they have become *cliche*.

When it came to imagining a contemporary protocol fiction aesthetic, the approach had to be: *do as Astounding did* in embracing the art of its time, not *look as Astounding looked*. Since a significant aspect of what sets *Protocolized* apart editorially is its embrace of LLM-assisted writing, it made sense to train our own ima

generation model.



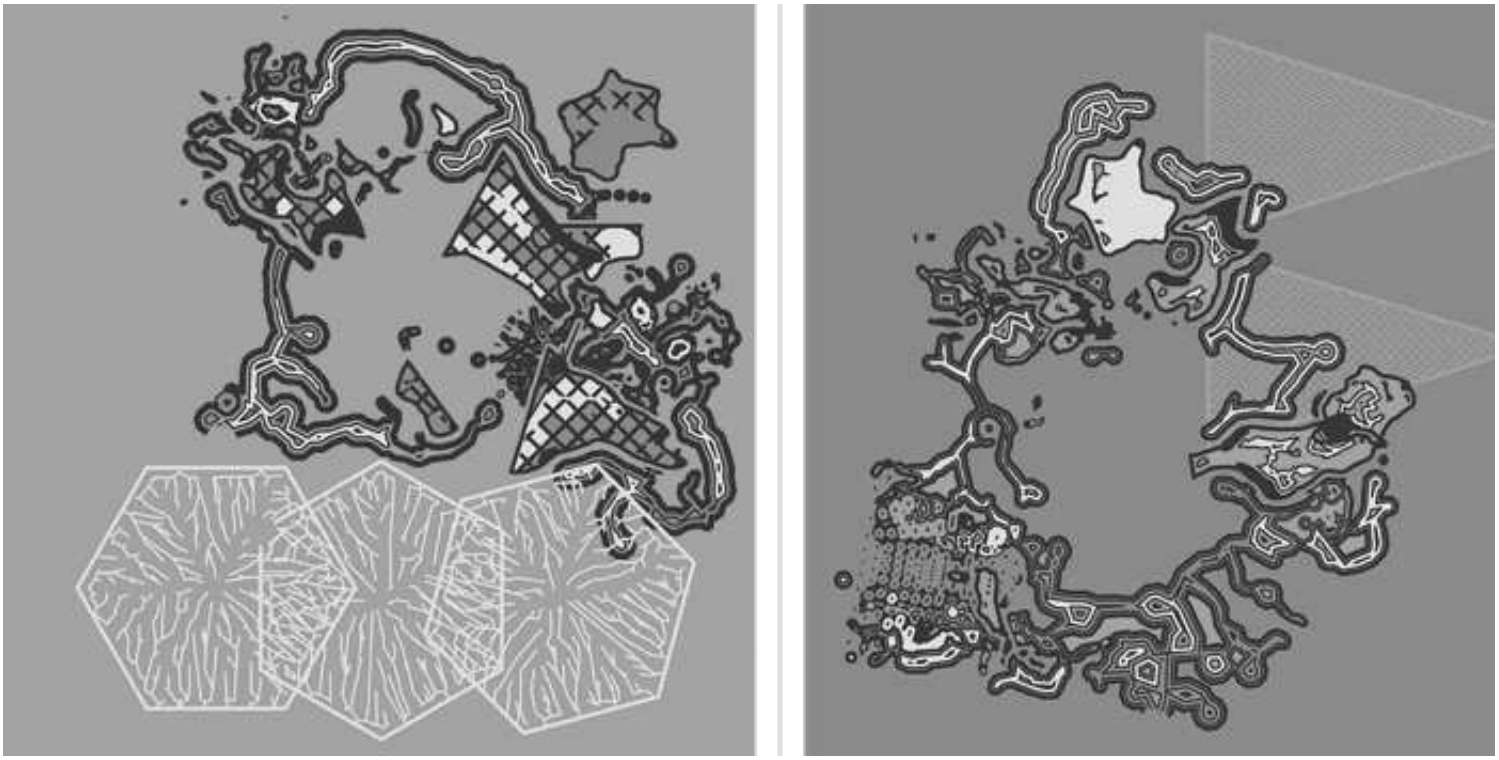
Examples of training art for the author's model.

In collaboration with TITLES, a platform for training and distributing image generatic models by artists, we have created *two* new models, with the initial intention of usin them to distinguish between our protocol fiction output and the non-fiction, Summe of Protocols program-related content that we publish. The TITLES studio interface allows us to sample both models in a single generation, so these categories can be permeable as necessary.

Unlike the major image generation platforms directed at outputting polished-lookin images for content creators – Midjourney, ChatGPT, etc. – TITLES centres artists by naming them, giving them creative control over their training art, paying royalties or the use of their models, and storing image metadata onchain for human-legible pro of provenance.

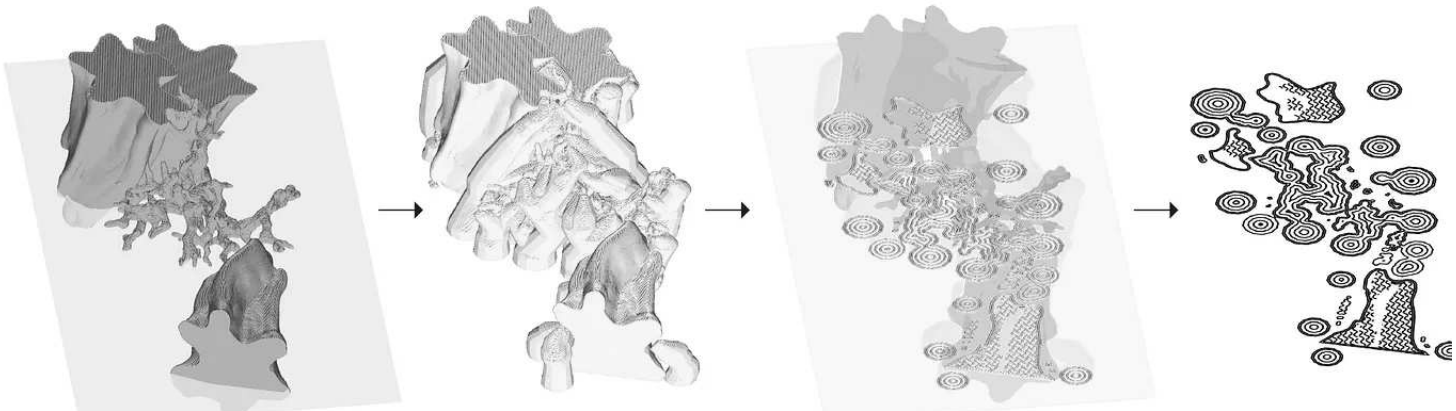
Both *Protocolized* models were trained on new images created specifically for the

purpose.



Examples of training art for the hyperpress model.

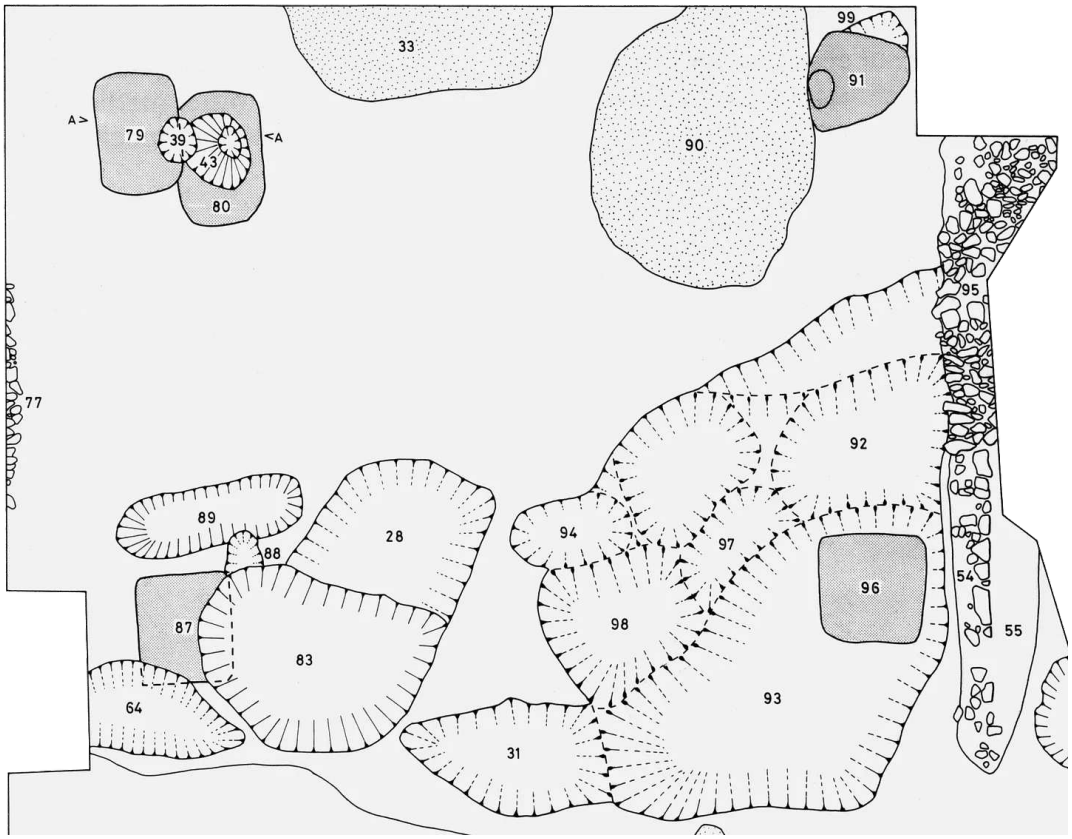
We invited Darius Ou of hyperpress to produce art for the first model. Darius's traini art is a byproduct of his incredible work in 3D printing, exploiting its primary graphic devices: the *slice* and the *cross-section*. Darius created an intricate 3D tree structu which was then sliced in software to produce fragmentary 2D cross sections, which Darius calls *Spaceland Trees*, in reference to Edwin A. Abbott's 1884 novella *Flatlan* whose two-dimensional protagonists are categorically unable to conceive of a three dimensional world.





The hyperpress training art derives from a complex 3D object.

The training art for the second model, created by the author, combines soft, smooth 'neumorphic' digital interface elements with traditional mark-making techniques use by archaeologists to document prehistoric sites of cultural interest.



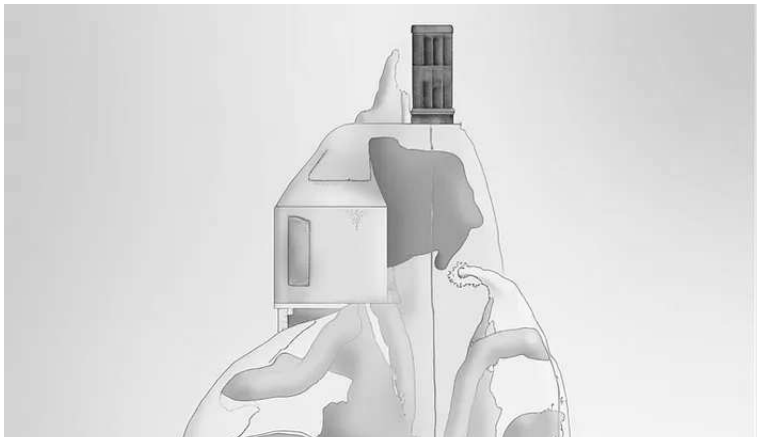
Fragment from a 1974 issue of *Transactions of the Ancient Monuments Society*.

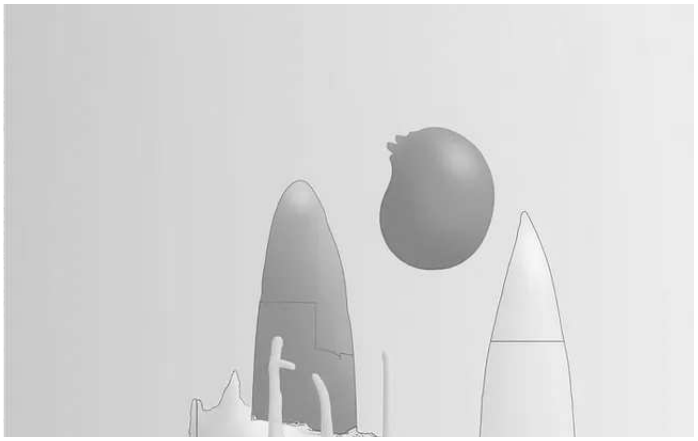
The approach with both models has been to focus training art on narrowly defined a highly abstract visual languages. This creates cohesion across outputs, albeit with t consequence that these models are not primed by their training art to resolve figurative prompts. When figurative imagery is preferred, we introduce reference images to coax the models to repurpose their formal elements, with intriguing resul

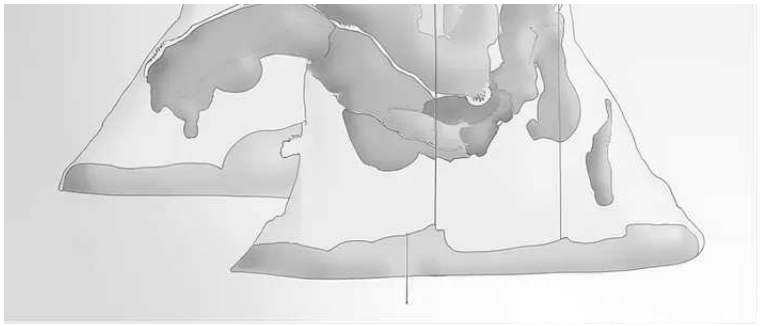
In issue 22 we published Ralph Witherell's story *Time to Die*, set in Serenity Now Hospice, a 2093 palliative care facility. Patients are held in a state of superficial comfort by monitoring, medication, and controlled hallucination. The story's affect i compassionate, with a suffocating undertone.



Our original art depicted the bird which features in the closing scene as a sudden reminder of the violence of mortality. A space vessel passes in the background – in Witherell's scenario "personal space travel was as common as taking a bus."



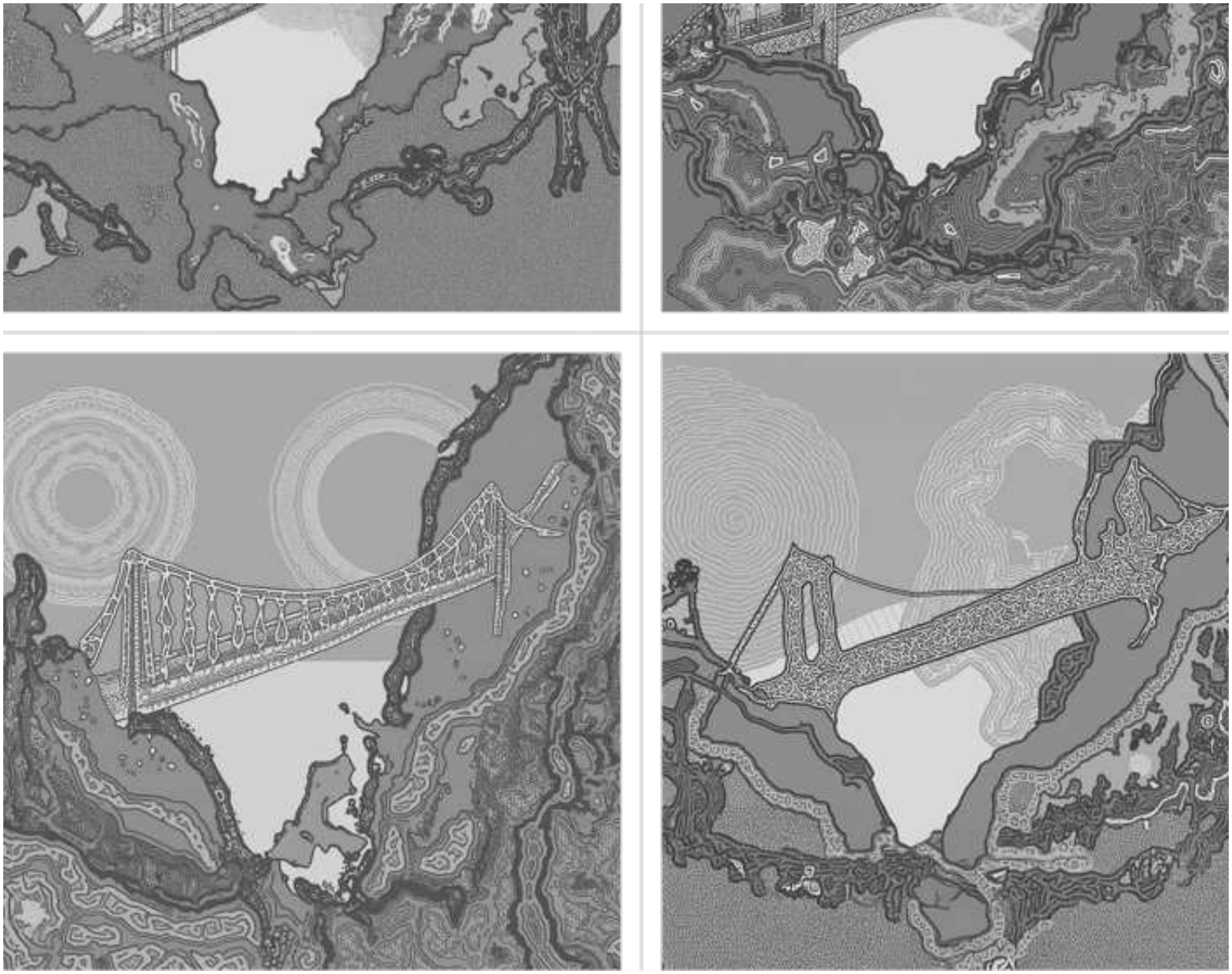







Were we to have illustrated this story with the author's model, we might have conflated the environment of Serenity Now with an abstract metabolic system, or introduced an anatomical reference image to emphasise bodily form. Darker, scatte elements would lend a hint of menace.



The art for our new *Bridge Atlas* salon series was generated with the hyperpress model. These examples show its outputs modulating between scenic composition a something flatter and more topographic. We used the former direction for a feature image, and the latter for YouTube title cards and thumbnails.

Other Internet's 2019 essay Headless Brands charted the emergence of brand identities that were not dependent on the taste and discipline of the organizations which they were representing. This nascent concept was exemplified by decentralized, blockchain-native organizations – with Bitcoin as the canonical case study – but it has only become *more* culturally salient and technologically practicab

in relation to developments in AI image generation.

Headlessness also resonates with a distinction made by John Fiske in their 1992 es *The Cultural Economy of Fandom*, between "official" cultures established by a giver brand or IP, and "fan" cultures which derive from and appropriate them. For Fiske, tl difference between the products of these cultures is not necessarily qualitative:

> Fans produce and circulate among themselves texts which are often crafted with production values as high as any in the official culture. The key differences betw the two are economic … fans do not write or produce their texts for money; indee their productivity typically costs them money.

In the present moment, in which the production of media *in the style of* other media a primary affordance of LLM technology, a publication such as *Protocolized* can eas collapse the distinctions theorized by Fiske and Other Internet by ceding the production and maintenance of its visual identity to its growing community of contributors.

Find our models, **Protocolized × hyperpress** and **Protocolized × James Langdon TITLES**.

To mark the release of these models, we have posted a **new protocol fiction boun** in the **Summer of Protocols Discord** – write a story prompted only by the feature image at the top of this post. The selected story will be published as a paid contribution in *Protocolized*.



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Tilman Porschütz æsthetical Therapy 5d

Liked by Protocolized

Love it. I now am motivated to try titles. I am working with artists in this exact way for a while r
This could help to bring forward their desire to us ai that doesn't look like 90 percent slop. It's
more fun to us ai in the earlier days when the models created more interesting abstract results
one has to force them to think outside of the box.

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